

**WRITING THE UNWRITABLE:
MELANCHOLIA IN THE WORKS OF MIKHAIL ZOSHCHENKO**

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Abstract

This study seeks to show how the literary legacy of Mikhail Zoshchenko (1894-1958) can productively be understood as a sustained textual engagement with the writer's own melancholia. Drawing equally on present-day critical approaches which increasingly emphasize the unity of life and art in the works of Zoshchenko, and on a psychoanalytically-influenced model of textual melancholia, this study posits and analyzes a melancholy component of the broader comic aesthetic that typified Zoshchenko's early work and on which, to a large degree, Zoshchenko's reputation still rests today. The study then proceeds to trace the development of this textual melancholia beyond its aesthetic representation in earlier works to show an increasingly direct discursive elaboration of the condition in works written after 1927. This evolution in the textual refraction of the writer's melancholia is shown to extend into the writer's later 'medical' works where they acquire a more or less explicit therapeutic function and become a kind of culturally nuanced Soviet language of melancholia. This development is contextualised by reference to Soviet conceptions of mental illness and a Soviet medical establishment characterized by an unusually dominant physiological understanding of the mind. Throughout, the study aims to demonstrate how a reading of the Zoshchenko oeuvre in terms of melancholia can deepen and broaden critical understandings of this enigmatic writer, opening up a hitherto neglected ideational component of Zoshchenko's art.

For those who are racked by melancholia, writing about it would have meaning only if writing sprang out of that very melancholia.

Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun* (1987)

I write of melancholy, by being busie to avoid melancholy.

Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621)

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My greatest obligation is to my family. This project has long hung over all their lives and they have valiantly pretended not to notice its shadow. In the case of my young sons Isaac and Hugh, it is a shadow they have not yet had the opportunity to live without. While it may be scant recompense for their forbearance, the resulting work would not have been the same without them: in this study of Being in language, their own uncertain steps along the journey towards life in speech have been a constant inspiration to me, and they are both written into the texture of this work in ways that they are unlikely to ever know. Finally, I must thank my wife Rebecca: without her timely and persuasive advice, and her unstinting support, this study of melancholia may well have assumed an altogether more practical aspect. It is to her that this work is dedicated.

Note on Transliteration

All transliterations from Cyrillic are performed in accordance to the Library of Congress system with the following exceptions. Where the names of Russian writers have become established in general English usage under different transliterations, I have tended to use those established transliterations in the general discussion: thus Dostoevsky, not Dostoevskii; Tolstoy, not Tolstoi; Gogol, not Gogol'. A further exception is made for the names of scholars where the discussion references work published both in English and in Russian; in this instance, for the sake of consistency, I have opted to use the established English version in the discussion, but observe the proper transliteration for source citation. This is particularly an issue with the émigré scholar Alexander Zholkovsky whose work on Zoshchenko is published across the two languages.

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Introduction

Mikhail Zoshchenko is a writer still best known for his comic short stories, works which have become both literary classics in their own right as well as touchstones for generations of subsequent Russian humorists. However, behind the laughter and the literary stardom, throughout his life Zoshchenko was locked in a relentless struggle with a debilitating melancholy which was to torment him periodically to the end of his days. This personal struggle forms the motivation and subject matter for his ill-fated part-autobiographical work *Before Sunrise* (*Pered voskhodom solntsa*, 1943). Part memoir, part treatise, part auto-therapeutic testimonial, this deeply complex and unconventional work does not in itself constitute the whole melancholic aspect of Zoshchenko's works; rather it opens a view onto, and stands at the pinnacle of, a melancholic aesthetic which stretches across the varied gamut of Zoshchenko's substantial creative output. As the present study will endeavour to demonstrate, the roots of this melancholic aesthetic run deep in Zoshchenko's writings and their textual significance goes far beyond the rather vague notion of the 'melancholic comic'; in fact, the melancholy Zoshchenko turns out to be a writer of rare skill crafting innovative linguistic expressions of a condition and affect whose miseries defy the consoling grasp of language.

Lying at the apex of his melancholic aesthetic, *Before Sunrise* forms the foundation of all critical readings of melancholia in Zoshchenko. Kornei Chukovskii, Zoshchenko's one time literary mentor and long-standing friend, wrote an important memoir of the writer which appeared as part of his collection *Contemporaries* (*Sovremenniki*) in 1965. His reminiscence, which relies heavily on, and quotes liberally from, *Before Sunrise* at a time when the book was still officially unavailable,

made much of the comic writer's "savage" ("svirepaia") melancholy.¹ He noted that: "Depression stifled him [Zoshchenko] from earliest childhood, and laughter was the sole antidote for his hypochondria, his sole salvation from it."² By suggesting that Zoshchenko's debilitating depression found relief in laughter, the second part of Chukovskii's assertion clearly implicates Zoshchenko's melancholy in the formation of his distinctive humorous style. This interesting approach is developed further to the point where Chukovskii asserts:

He constantly careered like this between these two extremes: between 'gloominess' and laughter. He tossed and turned both in life and in art. And, of course, laughter did not always prevail. Gloominess frequently did not want to yield, and then stories arose for Zoshchenko where laughter co-existed with anguish. Cheerfulness in combination with sadness – the best of Zoshchenko's works were coloured by this complex sensation, which is also, in essence, called humour."³

This perceptive reading of Zoshchenko's comic fiction fuses life and art in a creative embrace that casts the writer's melancholy as intrinsic to his art. Yet later on this bold fusion of life and art is blunted somewhat when Chukovskii moves on to the thirties.

Depression was indeed the curse of his whole life. By now, the middle of the thirties, he finally became firmly convinced of the fact that it also disrupted him, the writer, from depicting life in all its splendour and that, by strength of will, he must overcome this disease. Only then he would have the right to artistic creation.⁴

¹ К. И. Чуковский, *Sovremenniki in Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1964-1969), vol. 2, p. 539.

² «Хандра душила его с самого раннего детства, и смех был единственным противоядием его ипохондрии, единственным его спасением от нее.» Ibid, p. 494.

³ «Так между этими двумя крайностями он постоянно метался между 'угрюмством' и смехом. Метался и в жизни и в творчестве. И, конечно, смех побеждал не всегда. Угрюмство зачастую не хотело сдаваться, и тогда у Зошенко возникали рассказы, где смех сосуществует с тоской. Веселость в сочетании с грустью – этим сложным чувством, которое, в сущности, и называется юмором, окрашены лучшие произведения Зошенко.» Ibid, p.495.

⁴ «Хандра действительно была проклятием всей его жизни. Теперь, к середине тридцатых годов, он окончательно утвердился в той мысли, что она-то и мешает ему, писателю, изображать жизнь во всем ее блеске и что усилием воли он должен преодолеть эту хворь. Только тогда у него будет право на творчество.» Ibid, p.539.

What is interesting here is that Chukovskii stresses the way in which Zoshchenko's melancholy had now become an obstacle to his literary endeavours, whereas earlier it seemed to be part of the very wellspring of creative outpouring that had determined Zoshchenko's early literary success. This line of argument is reinforced later in Chukovskii's reminiscence when he insists that Zoshchenko's unrelenting attempts in the thirties to conquer his depression arose:

[...] not only because it [depression] caused him so much torment, but because for the most part he considered it dangerous and harmful to his literary creativity, to his future books.⁵

Here Zoshchenko's melancholic sufferings appear to be something very definitely opposed to literary creation. That it disrupts literary endeavours carries the implication that it is something separate from literature, something that should be without textual trace or effect in a literary work proper.

Thus, by the close of Chukovskii's reminiscences of Zoshchenko, there is a lingering tension as to the literary relevance of the writer's melancholy; on the one hand it points intriguingly to a melancholic aspect in Zoshchenko's aesthetic that would demand closer study, while on the other hand limiting that melancholy to a purely biographical significance, which, if anything, obscures his literary achievement. Although this tension remains ultimately unresolved, it is interesting to note that the last two citations above, in opposition to the preceding one which affirmed the inseparability of life and art, are cast in reported speech, as if recounting Zoshchenko's opinion from memory. They are thus distanced from Chukovskii's own voice, leaving the reader with the impression that the denial of any textual relevance to Zoshchenko's melancholy was an opinion held by the now dead author, while the

⁵ «Не только потому, что она причиняла ему столько мучений, а потому главным образом, что считал ее опасной и вредной для своего творчества, для своих будущих книг.» Ibid, p.543.

opinions of Chukovskii would seem to lean, albeit guardedly, in the direction of a unity of life and art.

This frustrating ambiguity is in part a reflection of the high value Chukovskii placed on Zoshchenko's talents as an ironist: he had a marked preference for the comic Zoshchenko and in the same memoir admits his sad dissatisfaction with the more serious turn Zoshchenko's work took after the thirties.⁶ However, it perhaps also needs to be considered in the wake of Zoshchenko's official disgrace following the critical opprobrium heaped on *Before Sunrise* in 1943, and his later savage treatment at the hands of a phalange of hostile critics led by Stalin's cultural commissar Andrei Zhdanov in 1946. These attacks were marked by their intense focus on Zoshchenko as a person. Their most stinging admonitions were directed at Zoshchenko's alleged personal failings, such as the erroneous accusation that he had sought refuge from the war in Alma Ata while his comrades fought and starved in Leningrad. The tenor of this campaign and its focus on the writer's person is obvious in the following statement from the time which has been attributed to Stalin: "It's not for society to reform itself according to Zoshchenko, but for him to reform, and if he doesn't, then he can go to hell."⁷ Against the background of this very personal campaign of vilification, Chukovskii and other Soviet critics trying to posthumously rehabilitate the Zoshchenko oeuvre would have been understandably anxious about allowing the ideologically-defamed person of the writer to intrude too much into their consideration of the work.

This pre-glasnost, specifically Soviet, reticence about bringing the texts too close to the person of the writer was further compounded by a more general dearth of

⁶ Ibid, pp. 538-551.

⁷ Statement attributed to Stalin at a meeting with the Presidium of the Writers' Union in B Sarnov and E Chukovskaia, 'Sluchai Zoshchenko', *Iunost*, 8 (1988), p.70. Quoted in G Carleton, *The Politics of Reception: Cultural Constructions of Mikhail Zoshchenko* (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), p.4. Translation is Carleton's.

extra-textual, biographical information then available. Until the appearance of a wealth of memoir material from the early 1980s onwards and Iurii Tomashevskii's diligent work of biographical synthesis which appeared in 1994, critics were mostly forced to rely for insight into the life of the writer on the sparse, playful and frequently contradictory autobiographical statements that Zoshchenko himself left behind.⁸ To this must be added Zoshchenko's frequent preference for narrative forms which complicated and distanced the authorial function, such as *skaz* and other types of authorial mask. In the history of Zoshchenko criticism, much more effort has been expended in understanding the formal nature and meaning of these fascinating narrative obfuscations in the context of Zoshchenko's political and cultural place in a developing Soviet reality than in re-inscribing the writer back into his works. Thus, much of the substantial field of Zoshchenko criticism to date, by largely leaving the person of the writer out of its frame of reference, has made practically no direct comment on the place of melancholia in the Zoshchenko oeuvre. As a result of this, until quite recently, there has existed something of a divide between a critical literature that shied away from extra-textual approaches to the works, and a wealth of biographical detail contained in a substantial memoir literature. This memoir literature is full of references to Zoshchenko's mental ill-health, but, in line with the form of the literary reminiscence, his melancholia is noted primarily as biographical fact and seldom, if ever, traced into concrete textual refraction.⁹ This latter feat is dependent on re-inscribing the author back into his works and more properly understanding the relationship between the writer's life and art; only on this basis can Zoshchenko's

⁸ Iu Tomashevskii, 'Khronologicheskaiia kanva zhizni i tvorchestva Mikhaila Zoshchenko' in Iu Tomashevskii (ed) *Litso i maska Mikhaila Zoshchenko* (Moscow: Olimp, 1994), pp. 340-365.

⁹ See for instance the reminiscences of Georgii Munblit, Leonid Utesov and Vladimir Poliakov. All are in A Smolian and N Iurgeneva (eds), *Mikhail Zoshchenko v vospominaniakh sovremennikov* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1981): G Munblit, 'Slezy skvoz' smekh', pp. 181-199; L Utesov, 'Bol'shoi chelovek', pp.228-231; V Poliakov, 'Zoshchenko zamenit' nel'zia', pp. 145-152.

melancholic aesthetic and the development of his Soviet language of melancholy become visible and open to proper interpretation.

More recent scholarship has begun re-inscribing the writer into his textual corpus; unsurprisingly, this has tended to concentrate on the later, more explicitly autobiographical works. Some of the earliest attempts to re-introduce the writer into the texts can be found amongst critics concerning themselves with Zoshchenko's psychological interests. In a 1967 article, Vera von Wiren-Garczynski pioneered psychological approaches to Zoshchenko's work by discussing the influence of Stefan Zweig's *Die Heilung durch den Geist* (*Healing Through the Mind*) on Zoshchenko's psychological interests.¹⁰ She traces the development of this psychological orientation from the 1933 story 'Healing and the Psyche' ('Vrachevanie i psikhika'), whose title is borrowed from the Russian translation of Zweig's book, through the 1934 novella *Youth Restored* (*Vozvrashchennaia molodost'*) to *Before Sunrise*. She explicitly linked this interest to Zoshchenko's struggle with his neurasthenia and suggested Zoshchenko's debt to Freud. Irene Masing-Delic, also stresses the importance of the fact that the narrator of *Before Sunrise* "suffers from melancholy".¹¹ Yet she sees this as an aspect of a broader fear of death and casts Zoshchenko's struggle with melancholy in terms of a "conflict between the 'old' and 'new' men in Soviet literature", with "the pronounced biological flavour of the old" contrasted with "the ascetism, purity and self-control of the new Soviet man".¹² In discussing the fears which Zoshchenko analyses in *Before Sunrise*, Masing-Delic perceptively notes their intertextual connections with works by Pushkin and Belyi, yet she does not accord the

¹⁰ V von Wiren-Garczynski, 'Zoshchenko's Psychological Interests', *Slavic and East European Journal*, 11 (1967), 1, pp.3-22.

¹¹ I Masing-Delic, 'Biology, Reason and Literature in Zoščenko's *Pered voschodom solnca*' in *Russian Literature*, 1980, 8, pp.77-101.

¹² *Ibid*, p.77.

concept of melancholia sufficient prominence to justify a critical reading on its own terms.

Thomas Hodge continues the psychological approach to Zoshchenko in his article exploring the Freudian elements in *Before Sunrise*. He sets the psychological discussions in this work against the background of Zoshchenko's long personal struggle with depression, observing that: "Zoshchenko was no dilettante: his psychological interests were, quite literally, a matter of life and death."¹³ However, in exploring the Freudian aspects of the book he ignores the important Freudian concept of melancholia, a term Zoshchenko uses frequently in *Before Sunrise* and which has a direct and definite theoretical purchase in Freudian psychoanalysis. In the process Hodge ends up according too little significance to the meaning and nature of melancholia in *Before Sunrise* and under-appreciating the degree to which Zoshchenko's use of the term indicates both a Freudian influence and a rejection of psychoanalysis. The Freudian theme in Zoshchenko is also touched on in a brief but insightful discussion of the writer in Alexander Etkind's history of Russian psychoanalysis. Noting that Zoshchenko's artistic outlook "reflected a peculiar blend of psychoanalytic vision and common sense", Etkind plainly finds this reflected in the stories, the heroes of which "entertained simple worries about things the Bolsheviks had nearly forgotten: health and well-being most of all."¹⁴ Unlike Hodge, he also notes the importance of melancholia in *Before Sunrise*.¹⁵ However, most importantly, he bases these insights in the context of a study of the history of Zoshchenko's mental illness through medical reports and papers contained in the writer's archive.¹⁶

¹³ T P Hodge, 'Freudian Elements in Zoshchenko's *Pered voskhodom solntsa* (1943)', *Slavonic and East European Review*, 67 (1989), 1: 1-28.

¹⁴ A Etkind, *Eros of the Impossible: The History of Psychoanalysis in Russia*, trans. N and M Rubins (Boulder CO: Westview, 1997), p.341.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.344.

¹⁶ *Ibid*. pp. 342-344.

However, because of the wide scope of Etkind's historical survey, his productive insights into the connection between Zoshchenko's history of mental illness and his work can, by necessity, only receive the most cursory textual analysis.

Krista Hanson's autobiographical approach also furthers the re-introduction of the writer into the texts, again with a dominant focus on the more overtly autobiographical later texts, particularly *Before Sunrise*.¹⁷ Moreover, she also emphasizes the auto therapeutic intentions of *Before Sunrise* in terms of the writer's own sufferings. However, there is perhaps a danger in her approach of reducing the texts to only their autobiographical content. This is something that shows particularly in the rather orthodox oedipal reading she performs on *Before Sunrise*, again ignoring the term melancholia in the work and downplaying that work's sincere polemic with psychoanalysis. Linda Scatton also makes much of Zoshchenko's autobiographical concerns and confronts the notion of melancholia in the later work.¹⁸ However, she maintains an ambiguous stance in relation to the melancholic aspect of Zoshchenko's works and is unable, in the final count, to envisage melancholia as much more than a biographical fact or textual start point. In a biographical survey she discusses the "neurasthenia which gripped him [Zoshchenko] in the twenties"¹⁹ and mentions how "he also suffered from acute depression and anxiety".²⁰ Moreover, when noting that "there is more than a casual connection between the art and lives" of Gogol and Zoshchenko she cites "similar pathologies, depressive tendencies and untimely and

¹⁷ See her 'Kto vinovat? Guilt and Rebellion in Zoshchenko's Accounts of Childhood' in D Rancour-Laferriere (ed) *Russian Literature and Psychoanalysis* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia PA: John Benjamins, 1989), pp. 285-302. See also her 'Autobiography and Conversion: Zoshchenko's *Before Sunrise*' in J G Harris (ed) *Autobiographical Statements in Twentieth-Century Russian Literature* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 133-153.

¹⁸ L Scatton, *Mikhail Zoshchenko: Evolution of a Writer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 107-127.

¹⁹ Ibid, p.51.

²⁰ Ibid, p.50.

unnatural deaths” as factors linking them.²¹ However, when it comes to her readings of Zoshchenko’s works there is little attempt to identify or critically appraise Zoshchenko’s melancholic aesthetic, even in works such as the 1924 tale ‘Wisdom’ (*‘Mudrost’*) where the theme of melancholy is remarkably explicit and, in fact, intrinsic to the plot. Scatton also notes that Zoshchenko’s struggle to cure his melancholy “found its reflection in the new, more positive hero of *Youth Restored*.”²² However, again there is no deeper analysis of the implications of this assertion. With *Before Sunrise* the theme of melancholy is impossible to ignore, for as Scatton notes, it is the “*raison d’être*” of the work.²³ Yet even here, there is little analysis of exactly how this motivating factor of the work is realised textually or any attempt to read the work on what are, by her admission, the book’s own terms. Scatton no doubt sees the melancholic in Zoshchenko as peripheral to her principal project of analysing the formal and thematic continuities that link the Zoshchenko oeuvre. However, as the present work will try to show, this laudable project can only be amplified and extended by a more detailed reading of Zoshchenko’s melancholic aesthetic, which could be held to function as a unifying theme spanning his whole literary career.

An extremely productive turn in Zoshchenko scholarship was marked by the appearance of Andrei Siniavskii’s article ‘The Myths of Mikhail Zoshchenko’ in 1989.²⁴ Siniavskii emphasized the connection between the work and the melancholia clearer than ever before:

²¹ Ibid, p.52.

²² Ibid, p.255.

²³ Ibid, p.51.

²⁴ A Siniavskii. ‘Mify Mikhaila Zoshchenko’, *Voprosy literatury*, 1989, 5. Repinted in Iu Tomashevskii (ed.), *Litso i maska*, pp. 238-253. All references will be to this edition.

For his whole life, Mikhail Zoshchenko attempted to free himself from a melancholic yearning that had consumed his soul. His creative work is particularly devoted to these attempts.²⁵

Significantly, he also suggested that this auto-therapeutic engagement with melancholia extended beyond the obvious mature texts like *Before Sunrise* and *Youth Restored* (*Vozvrashchennaia molodost'*, 1933); he implicitly extends this same auto-therapeutic intention into the comic fiction, suggesting that “like Gogol, Zoshchenko tried to cure himself through laughter.”²⁶ The unifying auto-therapeutic intention that Siniavskii sees embracing the whole oeuvre leads him to his greatest insight: the neurotic complex that Zoshchenko analysed in *Before Sunrise* in fact contains “many keys to [Zoshchenko’s] subjects and the secrets of his literary work”.²⁷

The major drawback to Siniavskii’s analysis is its brevity, which means that it cannot adequately demonstrate the extent of its claims: it concentrates almost exclusively on *Before Sunrise* and some of the stories from *Sentimental Tales* (*Sentimental'nye povesti*, 1927-1930). The critically rigorous development of Siniavskii’s idea comes with the ground-breaking work of Alexander Zholkovsky. Like Siniavskii, Zholkovsky finds in *Before Sunrise* a guide to the authorial vision underpinning the earlier comic fiction; whereas Siniavskii spoke of *Before Sunrise* as offering “many keys” to the earlier fiction, Zholkovsky takes this claim even further to characterize the work as an authorial “coda” which “offers explicit critical insights that are usually the scholar’s business to uncover”.²⁸ Zholkovsky sees *Before Sunrise* as offering an accessible introduction to basic psychological and existential concerns

²⁵ «Всю жизнь Мих. Зошенко старался освободиться от снедавшей его душу тоски. Этим стараниям, в частности, отдано его творчество.» Ibid, p.246.

²⁶ «Подобно Гоголю, Зошенко пробовал лечиться смехом.» Ibid, p.246.

²⁷ «Эта книга содержит многие ключи к его сюжетам и тайнам литературного творчества»; Ibid, pp. 246-247.

²⁸ A K Zholkovsky, “What is the Author Trying to Say with his Artistic Work?” Rereading Zoshchenko’s Oeuvre’, *Slavic and East European Journal*, 40 (1996), 3, p.459.

which Zoshchenko rehearsed equally, if more obliquely, in his earlier comic works.

He thus points to a unifying vision that stretches across all Zoshchenko's works.

Even in his most funny pieces Zoshchenko appears as a gloomy philosopher of life, and his 'philistine' masks as defensive, comic variations on the theme of those very phobias, with which the narrator-hero of *Before Sunrise* seriously torments himself, and which are also found in memoirs of the real author.²⁹

It is important to note that this underlying unity of authorial vision correlates with extra-textual, biographical resources: it is thus a confessional vision, a vision of psychological expressionism. In fact it is a variant of Zholkovsky's own structuralist critical model of authorial expressionism which he termed "a Poetics of Expressiveness".³⁰ Thus, Zholkovsky offers precisely that breadth of critical vision, capable of uniting writer and text, which is needed to reveal the extent of Zoshchenko's textual engagement with melancholia.

It is noteworthy that the unifying authorial presence that Zholkovsky finds beneath the textual surface of the oeuvre turns out to be "a gloomy philosopher of life". Although he does not specifically refer to the notion of melancholia, there is a strikingly melancholic aspect to the unchanging authorial vision of perpetual instability that Zholkovsky finds in Zoshchenko. For Zholkovsky, the writer's worldview "is characterized by 'fear of the instability of life', 'a thirst for peace and order' and 'distrustful searches for protection from danger'".³¹ Zholkovsky also finds in Zoshchenko a consistent yearning for order, often represented by the paraphernalia of Soviet power, frequently married to dissatisfaction with the troubling disorder that

²⁹ «Даже в самых смешных своих вещах Зощенко предстает мрачноватым философом жизни, а его «мещанские» маски – защитными комическими вариациями на темы тех же фобий, которыми всерьез мучается герой-повествователь ПБС, узнаваемый также в мемуарах о реальном авторе.» А К Zholkovskii, *Mikhail Zoshchenko: Poetika nedoveriia* (Moscow: Shkola "Iazyki russkoi kul'tury", 1999), p.308.

³⁰ See A K Zholkovsky, *Themes and Texts: Towards a Poetics of Expressiveness* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1984).

³¹ «... характеризуется 'страхом перед непрочностью жизни', 'жаждой покоя и порядка' и 'недоверчивыми поисками защиты от опасностей'.» *Poetika nedoveriia*, p.60.

this brings;³² this sense of self-destructive desire repeated *ad infinitum* has a profoundly melancholic ring. More particularly, Zholkovsky notes how in Zoshchenko blame is always located in the subject; the site of guilt is never to be found in the public realm.³³ In the theoretical discussion in the next chapter, the significance and centrality of subjective guilt within the Freudian notion of melancholia is discussed at some length. Zholkovsky also points to food being a particularly potent and recurrent phobia for all of Zoshchenko's heroes, serving ultimately as a symbol of life and death.³⁴ The pathological relation to food and the ultimate refusal to eat are relatively common depressive symptoms, ones which Zoshchenko experienced personally.

By exposing the deep thematic unities that stretch across the Zoshchenko oeuvre and showing what can be gained from re-reading the stories in the light of *Before Sunrise* Zholkovsky opens up wide, new avenues for Zoshchenko scholarship. However, there are limitations to Zholkovsky's approach. His concentration on the structural consistency of authorial vision occasionally runs the risk of flattening the very real differences across the oeuvre. While both are participants in a recognizably similar worldview, there is a great deal of formal, stylistic and discursive difference between the comic stories of the twenties and *Before Sunrise*. In particular, using the latter work only as an authorial "coda" for revealing a vision already articulated in the twenties does not do adequate justice to the substantial evolution in both form and content represented by *Before Sunrise*. Moreover, this view also leaves unexplored precisely what is gained by revealing the substantial autobiographical content of the earlier stories, what Zoshchenko thus seems to be implying about the literary process and what he may have gained personally from the kind of reading of himself implied

³² Ibid, pp. 164-170.

³³ Ibid, p.33.

³⁴ Ibid, pp. 234-238.

in this process. The melancholy reading of Zoshchenko in the Soviet context proposed in the current study will address all of these areas and in the process will serve to advance Zholkovsky's three-fold interpretative project of: firstly, "uncovering the deep unity of the usually opposed aspects of his work";³⁵ secondly, "liberating the writer to a certain extent from the deterministic embraces of the epoch" to stand among the classics of world literature;³⁶ and finally, "the establishment of the deep points of convergence of Zoshchenko [...] with Russian (and particularly official Soviet) cultural tradition."³⁷

In her 2003 monograph, Lesley Milne began to extend the discussion of melancholia beyond the previous critical focus on works of the thirties and forties such as *Before Sunrise* and *Youth Restored*. Milne emphasised the fact that Zoshchenko's melancholic sufferings "had reached a peak in 1926" and that they coincided with the author's struggle against vituperative attacks by critics from the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP).³⁸ Indeed, she suggests that "the RAPP critics may have appeared to him [Zoshchenko] less terrifying than his own attacks of psycho-neurosis", and suggests that Zoshchenko's creation of the melancholic narrator figure of Kolenkorov in *Sentimental Tales* served as "a comic defensive shield" allowing him to simultaneously mock his critics and his melancholy.³⁹ The importance of the year 1926 for Zoshchenko's struggle with melancholia, the melancholic aspects of Kolenkorov and the way that the writer's struggle with melancholia became increasingly entwined with broader issues of

³⁵ «Выявление глубинного единства обычно противопоставляемых друг другу аспектов его творчества»; Ibid, p.308.

³⁶ «на определенную степень освобождения писателя из детерминистских объятий эпохи»; Ibid, p.308.

³⁷ «Констатации[я] глубинных точек схождения Зошенко [...] с русской (в частности, официальной советской) культурной традицией.» Ibid, p.308.

³⁸ L Milne, *Zoshchenko and the Ilf-Petrov Partnership: How They Laughed* (Birmingham: Birmingham Slavonic Monographs, 2003), p.44.

³⁹ Ibid, pp. 43-44.

ideological conformity and conviction are all themes that will be developed further in the present study. Milne also makes the perceptive observation that *Youth Restored* can be read, at least in part, as a kind of self-help book. Seeing *Youth Restored* as a work exhibiting a strong kinship with Zoshchenko's earlier documentary work *Letters to the Writer* (*Pis'ma k pisatel'iu*, 1929), Milne suggests that both works cast the writer in the role of "“agony uncle”", a position that he was "“elected”" to by his sizeable readership.⁴⁰ Milne stresses the fact that Zoshchenko was constantly bombarded with requests for advice from readers and she sees *Youth Restored* as a book "“which would make his advice generally available and also track the thought-process by which he himself had arrived at these conclusions.”"⁴¹ This understanding of Zoshchenko's intentions in these works as therapeutic in a broad sense represents an important insight over and above the more usual interpretation of Zoshchenko's medical writings as auto-therapy. Moreover, the positing of Zoshchenko's loyal readership as a sort of therapeutic community is extremely important; as shall be argued later in this study, communities of readers and acts of reading assume an enormous importance in Zoshchenko's writings after 1926.

The confluence of melancholia and ideological demand also appears in Keith Liver's understanding of Zoshchenko's mature works in the second chapter of his exploration of cultural representations of the Stalinist body. His study is concerned only with the 'Stalin-era' fiction of the thirties and forties, and adopts an approach heavily influenced by Zholkovsky; however, he seeks to correct a perceived deficit of cultural contextualisation in Zholkovsky's reading of the later Zoshchenko by situating the writer's mature fiction in a broader Stalinist narrative of re-forging. Echoing Masing-Delic to a certain degree, Livers convincingly depicts this cultural

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 70.

⁴¹ Ibid, p.70.

dynamic as a rejection of the feminine, fleshy reality of embodied existence in favour of a rationalized, masculinised and discursive model of selfhood, in short: “the violent separation of the self from its biological point of origin.”⁴² Noting that many of Zoshchenko’s works from this period “are nothing if not allegories of the progressive rationalization of the author’s body and soul”, he reads Zoshchenko’s auto-therapeutic theme as, before all else, a desperate personal quest for ideological conformity.⁴³ Thus, in reference to Zholkovsky’s suggestion of Zoshchenko’s deep-rooted search for order, as represented in the author’s neurotic mythology by the punishing hand, Livers observes “the almost uncanny merging of the author’s private myths with the ideology of Stalinism – which is to say, in the fusing of the authoritarian and the authorial hands.”⁴⁴ This is an important contribution, for it is one of the tragic peculiarities of Stalinist civilisation that the very melancholic struggle to inscribe a pre-linguistic selfhood into the discursive realm can be politicized to such a degree.

However, Livers goes beyond this insight to argue that Zoshchenko’s auto-therapy ultimately comes to constitute an act of such “brutal self-censorship” that it becomes a piece of “Stalinist myth-making” and tantamount personally for Zoshchenko to an “artistic lobotomy”.⁴⁵ This conclusion is based on a reading of *Before Sunrise* as simple confessionalism and outright didacticism. Livers admits ambiguities in other works of the thirties (particularly *Youth Restored*), and even that “almost no rehabilitation in Zoshchenko’s oeuvre is ever complete.”⁴⁶ For Livers, however, the one that is complete is *Before Sunrise*, where, by the end, the author’s hand is “guided by none other than Stalinist ideology” and “chaos is definitively

⁴² K Livers, *Constructing the Stalinist Body: Fictional Representations of Corporeality in the Stalinist 1930s* (Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2004), p. 100.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 100.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p.108.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p.136.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p.126 and p.128.

exorcised from Zoshchenko's world."⁴⁷ The problem with this reading is that it rests on an exaggeration of the degree of resolution in *Before Sunrise*. This exaggeration results from reading the work primarily through a political lens rather than as the personal struggle with melancholia that it declares itself to be. To be sure there is politics in *Before Sunrise* and Livers is entirely correct to argue for its consideration in ideological context, but that consideration should never distract the reader from the work's primary melancholic argument. If the theme of melancholia is given sufficient prominence in the reading, as this study proposes to do, then *Before Sunrise* loses that appearance of unambiguous, surgical conformity with Stalinist utopianism and acquires a more pragmatic character in which those redemptive ambiguities from earlier in the thirties remain stubbornly present and create a more temperate urge towards considered personal accommodation to the regime. Moreover, as will be suggested later, by ignoring the melancholia in the work one misses a necessarily oblique note of genuine resistance at the close of the work.

The tendency to read *Before Sunrise* as closed, didactic and conformist is actually quite widespread among contemporary critics. An extreme example of this is Jeremy Hicks, for whom all the later works are characterised by "the use of a standardised, reliable form of narration instead of *skaz*": a development he describes as a "pernicious tendency".⁴⁸ *Before Sunrise* represents the apogee of this tendency: Hicks sees it as characterized by "a rigidly determinist vision"; it is "economic, authoritative and monolithic"; and it stands out primarily for its artistic "mediocrity" and "humourless piety".⁴⁹ In order to support a critical approach which finds the greatest literary value in Zoshchenko's ambivalent *skaz* narratives, Jeremy Hicks rejects most of Zoshchenko's works of the thirties and forties. He argues that these

⁴⁷ Ibid, p.131.

⁴⁸ J Hicks, *Mikhail Zoshchenko and the Poetics of Skaz*, (Nottingham: Astra Press, 2000), p. 167.

⁴⁹ Ibid, pp. 167-168.

works represent the abandonment of the ambivalent world-view which he values in the comic fiction of the twenties in favour of fixed, didactic narratives free from irony.

The enduring quality of Zoshchenko [...] does not lie in his neuroses, or some world-view separable from his narrative manner. Rather, it consists in the ambivalent humour created through his very use of the *skaz* form.⁵⁰

He similarly rejects any attempt, Zoshchenko's or otherwise, which seeks "to reduce the formal discrepancies of the stories to a purported psychological content".⁵¹ This hostility to psychological readings and the rejection of those works where Zoshchenko's concern with his melancholia is most obvious would seem, then, to exclude any consideration of Zoshchenko's melancholy. One might object that Hicks overestimates the supposed straight-forwardness of Zoshchenko's works of the thirties and forties: these are daring works which display as much formal inventiveness and narrative complexity as anything he wrote in the twenties. While Hicks values the "epistemological uncertainty that lies at the heart of the Zoshchenko short story", he ignores evidence of that same metaphysical reticence in later works.⁵² Hicks also overestimates the extent to which a psychological reading of the text closes off its meaning. It can be argued that the epistemological uncertainty and ambivalent world-view that Hicks fears losing in a psychological reading derive precisely from the melancholic aesthetic that the present study seeks to understand. Hicks seems to suggest this himself when he argues in his conclusion that:

The tendency towards the fragment and the unstable status of narrative authority in *skaz* were extended to their utmost [...] by an ideal exponent, a man racked by self-doubt.⁵³

⁵⁰ Ibid, p.17.

⁵¹ Ibid, p.7.

⁵² Ibid, p.163.

⁵³ Ibid, p.169.

The implication here is clear: the distinctiveness of Zoshchenko's *skaz* form finds a fascinating correlate in the writer's mental torments. Yet Hicks, no doubt due to his stated aversion to psychological readings, does not probe this correlation any further. This is a pity, for a clearer understanding of the melancholic theme in Zoshchenko's work would amplify existing readings, open potential new ones and close off none.

Gregory Carleton, while more temperate in his criticism of the later works, nonetheless sees them as a flawed and lamentable attempt by the writer to impose hermeneutic closure on the radical indeterminacy of his earlier work.⁵⁴ Carleton, although acknowledging the origins of *Youth Restored* in the writer's own history of mental ill-health, similarly tends to downplay the melancholic theme in Zoshchenko's work as a whole.⁵⁵ In a perceptive reading of the Zoshchenko oeuvre which is heavily influenced by post-structuralist theory, Carleton's primary concern is tracing the fate of a style of writing characterized by an ambiguous textuality that defies any definitive meaning; Carleton finds this style in abundance in the early work, but suggests that it is increasingly curtailed by the author throughout the thirties and forties. He thus sees Zoshchenko as a writer primarily engaged in a struggle to assert meaning over his own writing rather than as one engaged in a struggle to assert meaning over his melancholia. In this regard, he claims of *Before Sunrise*:

Its subject is not Zoshchenko's neuroses or his past but, ultimately, Zoshchenko himself. It demonstrates his anxiety over and attempted resolution of the polyvalency inherent in all discourse. Just as there is only one answer to his psychological trauma, a text must have only one authoritative reading.⁵⁶

However, what Carleton fails to countenance is that perhaps the two struggles are mutually implicated, that the struggle against the radical polyvalency of textual

⁵⁴ G Carleton, *The Politics of Reception*, pp. 111-160.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p.85.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p.159.

meaning might have its roots in melancholia, a condition in which the sufferer confronts, among other things, a catastrophic inability to articulate and believe in fixed meanings. When Carleton does address Zoshchenko's melancholic sufferings it is always relegated to the biographical background. For instance, when forced to confront the explicitly melancholic inflection of the narrator of *Sentimental Tales*, Carleton notes in passing how this "neurasthenia speaks to Zoshchenko's own troubled disposition (his depressions and melancholy were already in full swing)"; to a certain degree, the parentheses are particularly revealing in this line and evidence a broader sense in which the writer's life is kept at definite remove from the texts themselves.⁵⁷ This remove is particularly evident when Carleton broaches the serious depressive relapse that struck Zoshchenko in the wake of his critical pillorying in 1946:

It seems that nearly all the psychological and physical ills that he had explored, mocked and feared in his writing – self-doubt, depression, the debilitating effects of age, chronic fatigue, frail nerves, a weak heart and hypochondria – converged after 1946 to incapacitate him.⁵⁸

Although seemingly struck by the irony of this fact, Carleton seems reluctant to pursue this to its logical conclusion. The connection between Zoshchenko's writing and his melancholic sufferings in this instance seems at least clear enough to demand further analysis. By ignoring the melancholic aspects of Zoshchenko's writings, Carleton has perhaps missed a deeper dimension to his own understanding of Zoshchenko's work.

Another scholar who has adopted a critical approach that consciously downplays, or even denies, the melancholic theme in Zoshchenko's writing is Rachel

⁵⁷ Ibid, pp.71-72.

⁵⁸ Ibid, pp. 6-7.

May, who relegates it to a parenthetical, purely biographical significance. In a provocative and original reading of *Before Sunrise*, she argues against the scholarly consensus which sees the work as serious in intent. Rather, she argues that the work constitutes an elaborate, ironic play on themes of consciousness and censorship. In this reading, considerations of melancholy are downgraded in the work to the point where she claims that:

Upon an alternative, contextualised reading, *Before Sunrise* appears not to be about melancholy or even about self-understanding, but about consciousness and repression on many levels: personal, social, artistic and political.⁵⁹

May is one of the few critics to challenge the simple confessionism of *Before Sunrise* and in this performs a valuable service. As shall become clear later on, this study will propose a reading in which the acknowledgement of a degree of narrative distance is indispensable to a proper understanding of the work. However, May goes too far in this direction: a degree of narrative distance is not the same as ironic parody. Thus, in spite of the daring of her analysis, her claim does not ultimately convince as it is dependent on the acceptance of her ironic reading of *Before Sunrise* and her rejection of the work's melancholic concerns. The work is really too long and ponderous to be convincingly read as playful irony. No matter how much cultural contextualisation one indulges in, at the final count *Before Sunrise* just is not funny. Zoshchenko, as a consummate master of well-paced comic prose, knew how to craft playful irony, and it is hard to believe, if irony was his intent, that he could have got it so drastically wrong. Such a reading is also belied by an abundance of extra-textual evidence to support the seriousness of intent that informed Zoshchenko's work on the

⁵⁹ R May, 'Superego as literary Subtext: Story and Structure in Mikhail Zoshchenko's *Before Sunrise*', *Slavic Review*, 55 (1996), 1, p.106.

book, not least his explicit rejection of irony in the 1930s.⁶⁰ As for the rejection of the melancholic theme, this study will try to show that it is a consistent concern across Zoshchenko's oeuvre; this consistency surely subverts the attempt to depict it as an ironic stand-in employed in a free standing polemic against censorship.

The present study, in opposition to the approaches of Hicks, Carleton and May, proceeds from the supposition that the theme of melancholia in Zoshchenko would reward serious critical attention in its own right. Previous scholarship has furnished many suggestive insights into the nature of Zoshchenko's textual engagement with melancholy, yet this has always been incidental to their primary critical focus, with the result that the melancholy theme in Zoshchenko has never received the systematic and theoretically informed critical treatment it deserves. Moreover, in its growing tendency to stress the mutual implication of life and art in Zoshchenko's work, current criticism (especially in the approaches pioneered by Zholkovsky and Siniavskii) also furnishes many of the appropriate critical tools for just such a study. It is this gap in the current scholarship that the present study aims to address by reading and analysing the textual contours of Zoshchenko's melancholy in historical context; in this way it will reveal a melancholy that is both an aesthetic phenomenon and an innovative attempt to forge a language adequate to the disjuncture between self and discursive meaning which lies at the heart of the melancholic condition.

In the first instance, the study will seek to establish some of the terminological and theoretical parameters of the discussion that follows. It will describe a psychoanalytic understanding of melancholia (referencing Freud, Klein and Kristeva) for purposes of comparative theoretical elucidation of Zoshchenko's emerging

⁶⁰ See for example K Chukovskii, *Sovremenniki*, pp. 538-539.

understanding of the condition. The choice of theoretical paradigm is a reflection of Zoshchenko's own sustained engagement with psychoanalytic thought and the particular suitability of psychoanalytic thought to textual analysis. It is important to note that what is proposed here is not a straightforward psychoanalytic reading of the Zoshchenko oeuvre. Rather, the aim is to articulate a more or less free-standing theoretical paradigm which will be kept substantially separate from the exposition of Zoshchenko's textual melancholia. The intention is to establish a parallelism with sufficient ideational proximity for the theory and the textual exegesis to resonate productively, allowing the often oblique melancholia in Zoshchenko's works to come to the surface un-coerced. The reason for this approach is to facilitate, as far as possible, the emergence of Zoshchenko's textual melancholia on its own terms, and thus to remain alert to the subtleties and developmental dynamic of Zoshchenko's thinking about melancholia.

This, of course, in no way detracts from the validity of more orthodox psychoanalytic readings of the Zoshchenko oeuvre in terms of Freudian clinical categories; indeed, as the foregoing discussion made clear, several important studies have adopted precisely this approach.⁶¹ Neither does this suggest that the critical potential of more orthodox approaches has been exhausted; there remains much of value to be learned from reading the Zoshchenko oeuvre in this way. Indeed, an attempt to understand the typical Zoshchenko hero in terms of the classic obsessive-compulsive mechanism would make for an illuminating study of the role of anxiety, and especially depressive anxiety, in a totalitarian society which would have a definite relevance to the theme of melancholia proposed here.⁶² However, in the context of the

⁶¹ See the discussion of the work of Hodge and Hanson above.

⁶² The obsessive-compulsive mechanism is described in the case study better known as the 'Rat Man'. See S Freud, 'Notes upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. J Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), Vol. 10, pp. 151-249.

present study's primary aim of reading Zoshchenko's melancholia on its own terms, this kind of approach would run the distinct risk of reading Freud through Zoshchenko. Moreover, as will be argued later, it is precisely the clinical vagueness of the term 'melancholia' that Zoshchenko values in his use of it. It is for these reasons that this study will avoid trying to understand Zoshchenko or his work in terms of Freudian diagnostic categories.

Having established the comparative theoretical framework against which the exposition of Zoshchenko's textual melancholia can be performed, the first chapter will then conclude by providing a necessarily brief indication of the intertextual resources in Russian literature and culture that will come to inform Zoshchenko's textual engagement with his own melancholia. This engagement will then be read, more or less in chronological order, in the following chapters.

Chapters two and three will concentrate on elucidating an oblique melancholic aesthetic underlying much of Zoshchenko's famous comic fiction from the twenties. Chapter two will seek to locate a melancholia residing in the textual absences and occlusions that fill Zoshchenko's stories. Chapter three will, using Zholkovsky's understanding of a canon unified by a poetics of authorial expression, attempt to locate a melancholia in a model of thwarted authorial effacement readily identifiable in much of the early fiction. The discussion in chapter two will be based on close readings alone as it endeavours to argue for the existence of a melancholia that can be read on its own basis. Chapter three, however, will embellish this textual exegesis with appeal to a variety of extra-textual resources; as will become clear, it is in the nature of the melancholia discussed in this chapter that it requires extra-textual elucidation. Together, these two chapters will depict a melancholia that is

appropriately hidden from discursive view, but whose textual presence remains central to the particularities of the Zoshchenko style.

The next four chapters will posit a definite change in this textual engagement with melancholia which coincides with the important depressive relapse that shook Zoshchenko's health in 1926 and 1927; they will posit the progression from an aesthetic representation of melancholia to an increasingly direct discursive elaboration of it. This period of course coincides with a widely observed change in the style, form and narrative voice of Zoshchenko's work in general and these chapters will argue for the primarily melancholic basis of these obvious textual developments. Chapters four and five will concentrate on explaining this textual evolution in terms of the emergence of a parodically inflected, but increasingly non-comedic, authorial presence, and the emergence of this new authorial model out of sustained acts of authorial reading and re-reading. Chapters six and seven will map these textual developments into the explicitly therapeutic works *Youth Restored* and *Before Sunrise*; they will further try to locate the therapeutic discussion conducted in these works within the context of Soviet understandings of mental illness and a medical establishment characterized by an oppressive physiological bias.

The value of such a study is threefold. Firstly, it will enhance critical understanding of Zoshchenko by revealing extra dimensions to his humour, his literary language and his perpetual preference for unusual and fragmentary literary forms. It will also further the post-Soviet rehabilitation of the person of Zoshchenko back into his works, in the process taking forward the valuable critical project of unifying Zoshchenko's comic work of the twenties with his later more serious works of the thirties and forties. The study of melancholia undertaken here will also reveal an underappreciated ideational component to Zoshchenko's art. Secondly, by reading

an attempt to articulate a language of melancholy in Zoshchenko's works, the current study contributes to the scholarly appreciation of an understudied area of Soviet culture. This work will try to show that melancholia presented very particular difficulties in a Soviet context which left very little room for inexplicable pathologies of the self. But more than this, when expanded into an allegorical cultural category, as Zoshchenko seems to imply in *Before Sunrise*, then his notion of melancholia can be argued to cut to the bone of the totalitarian experience in the Soviet Union. Thus it could be argued to have some relevance from a broader area-studies and historical perspective. Finally, this study will argue that Zoshchenko's language of melancholy, relying as it does on carefully poised parody, represents a genuinely innovative attempt to grapple with a perennial concern of humanity. His writings on melancholy deserve to be considered alongside other melancholic reflections in world literature; like these other meditations on melancholia, his insights have value for all humanity, whether afflicted by pathological sadness or not.

Chapter 1

“The Pallor of Words”

In the course of Zoshchenko's tale 'The Lilacs are Blooming' ('Siren' tsvetet', 1930) the narrator tries in vain to compose a suitably lyrical, literary evocation of young love blossoming under a canopy of lilac bloom. In frustration, he rues his lack of poetic sensibility, explaining that:

The pallor of words and the uncertainty of thoughts did not allow the author to become too absorbed in the virgin jungle of Russian artistic prose.¹

Articulated almost as an aside, this strange sentence is as vexing as it is fascinating. Moreover, its importance in the tale is underscored by the fact that it is part of the only reference to the eponymous lilac blossom in the whole story. Such prominence focuses attention on this vexatious sentence, and impels an attempt to ponder its meaning further. Leaving aside the suggestive “virgin jungle of Russian artistic prose” for the moment, one is confronted with this troubling notion of “the pallor of words”. Posited as the subject of the sentence, it suggests, if only by implication, an alienation not just from the literary language, but also from and in language in a more general sense. It speaks of a bloodless, devitalized vocabulary whose symbolic meaning seems distant, somehow unable to convince even the speaker. What is more, it is presented as something in itself, rather than a symptom or effect. Indeed the provenance of this abdicated meaning is not even hinted at.

A clue to the meaning of this important sentence is offered by the meta-literary nature of this intrusion of narrative voice which must therefore belong to the

¹ «Бледность слов и нерешительность мыслей не позволяли автору слишком углубляться в девственные дебри русской художественной прозы.» М М Zoshchenko, *Sentimental'nye povesti in Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh* (Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia literature, 1986-87), vol. 2, p.158. This collection will furnish the majority of source material for this study; for the purpose of brevity, future references to it will be indicated by volume and page only.

author-figure from the tale's introduction. Here the narrator informed the reader of "a surfeit of melancholy" ("izlishek melankholii") which had distorted his outlook in the past.² This opens the possibility of understanding this "pallor of words" in terms of melancholia, something which becomes even clearer when it is remembered that 'Lilacs are Blooming' was appended to Zoshchenko's *Sentimental Tales* (*Sentimental'nye povesti*) in editions of the collection published after 1930.³ As such this and other 'authorial' utterances became attributable to I V Kolenkorov, the fictional author-figure of the collection whose biography and outlook are elucidated in a series of authorial prefaces which were expanded through subsequent editions of the cycle. These prefaces, amongst other things, reveal Kolenkorov to be someone given to bouts of "neurasthenia, ideological wavering, serious contradictions and melancholia".⁴ In this context, by bemoaning "the pallor of words", the narrator appears to be alluding, at least in part, to the atrophied subjective investment in language that characterises the melancholic condition, in which, as Julia Kristeva has argued in her meditation on depression and melancholia, sufferers are marked by "the dead language they speak".⁵

A particularly noteworthy aspect of the citations from Zoshchenko's *Sentimental Tales* above, is the recurrent use of the archaic sounding word 'melancholia' (*melankholiia*). Although Zoshchenko describes depressive suffering in his works in a variety of ways, the recurrence of the fusty, poetic *melankholiia* with its foreign-sounding etymology is striking nonetheless, not least because it appears

² 2:145.

³ Iu V Tomashevskii, 'Primechaniia' in M M Zoshchenko, *Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh* (Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1986-87), 2:468.

⁴ «Неврастения, идеологическое шатание, крупные противоречия и меланхолия»; 2:10. The genesis and contents of the *Sentimental Tales*, and the development and function of the fictional narrator of these tales are discussed in more detail in Chapter 4 of the present study.

⁵ J Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p.53.

with varying frequency across both the comic and serious parts of the oeuvre.⁶ Needless to say, the melancholia in Zoshchenko is not restricted to his use of the term; however, in view of the writer's consistent recourse to the word *melankholiia* this study proposes to articulate this aspect of Zoshchenko's work under the term melancholia, as the closest English equivalent. It should be noted, however, that the terms are not perfectly synonymous: Russian does not seem to observe as strictly that tendency that Jennifer Radden observes in post-renaissance English to use 'melancholia' in more clinical contexts and 'melancholy' in more affective ones.⁷ While *melankholiia* frequently occurs in connection with abnormal psychology, it is by no means restricted to that usage and can just as easily be translated as 'melancholy'. This aspect of usage is important to note, for Zoshchenko often plays heavily on the way that the term can cut across both medical and literary discourse.

In fact, Zoshchenko's use of the word melancholia is much more than a simple matter of semantics; appropriately enough in a condition marked by alienation in language, terminology is often a vexed issue in writing about depressive suffering. William Styron, in his memoir of depression, gives an insight into the personal stakes involved in putting a name to one's private demon. While rebelling against the imposition of the bloodless, technocratic term 'depression', which he sees as unequal to the task of making sense of his condition, he suggests that:

'Melancholia' would still appear to be a far more apt and evocative word for the blacker forms of the disorder, but it was usurped by a noun with a bland tonality and lacking any magisterial presence,

⁶ The following examples of this usage are merely illustrative of this tendency and do not purport to be a definitive list: see 'Damskoe gore', 1: 335-336; 'Kuznitsa zdorov'ia', 1:349-350; *Sentimental'nye povesti*, 2:10, 125, 142, 145; *Vozvrashennaia molodost'*, 3:6, 10, 26; *Pered voskhodom solntsa*, 3:454, 455, 460.

⁷ J Radden (ed), *The Nature of Melancholy: from Aristotle to Kristeva* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 47-49. See also her *Moody Minds Distempered: Essays on Melancholy and Depression* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 58-72.

used indifferently to describe an economic decline or a rut in the ground, a true wimp of a word for such a major illness.⁸

Styron here yearns for the evocative, poetic potential of the term melancholia, as if its more “magisterial presence” might better equate to the magnitude of his grief, or perhaps even rescue his sufferings from the levelling embrace of a dispassionate medical typology.

Zoshchenko’s preference for the term, however, is of a significantly different order to Styron’s. A clue to what he might have valued in the term can be gleaned by reference to the *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of F A Brokgauz and I A Efron* (*Entsiklopedicheskii slovar’ F A Brokgauza i I A Efrona*). This late flowering of Imperial-era scholarship is a source with which Zoshchenko would almost certainly have been familiar. However, even if he never consulted the relevant article, it is at least indicative of early twentieth-century Russian understandings of melancholy. The entry for ‘*Melankholiia*’ begins by stressing the Greek etymology of the term, which originally referred to the black bile (μέλας - black, and κολος - bile), which was believed to cause the condition.⁹ This Greek provenance is important, for it underscores both the archaic nature of the term as well as its foreignness. As Ilya Vinitsky has argued, the word ‘*melankholiia*’ was an eighteenth-century import into Russia; before this period “there was no melancholy in Russia” in the sense that “there was no cultural tradition of rationalization and representation of man’s mental, bodily, or emotional life that stood behind the word”.¹⁰ But more than this, the term is etymologically inseparable from Greek humoristic medicine. The black bile, from which the word melancholia derives, was one of the four bodily humours, the relative

⁸ W Styron, *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness* (London: Vintage, 2004), p.36.

⁹ I E Andreevskii et al (eds), *Entsiklopedicheskii slovar’ F A Brokgauza i I A Efrona* (Saint Petersburg: Brokgauz-Efron, 1890-1907), sv “Melankholiia”.

¹⁰ I Vinitsky, ‘A Cheerful Empress and her Gloomy Critics: Catherine the Great and the Eighteenth-Century Melancholy Controversy’ in A Brintlinger and I Vinitsky (eds), *Madness and the Mad in Russian Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), p26.

balance or preponderance of which Greek thought generally, and Hippocrates in particular, believed to determine either sickness or health. Each of the humours was believed to derive from and correspond to one of the four elements and was equated with one of the four seasons: “cold and dry melancholy, which had affinities with earth, was especially prevalent in autumn or winter.”¹¹ Later humouristic thought saw the four humours as constituent elements of blood which were ingested into the body with food. Black bile was seen as “the incompletely digested portion of the blood, the sediment and the dregs” and, being cold and dry, was held to have “affinities with old age and death”.¹² It was believed that the spleen kept black bile within manageable limits. This was important for, in addition to depressive suffering, the melancholy humour was held to cause numerous other diseases from epilepsy to tumours. Over time this humouristic basis became overlaid with other symbolic associations; the melancholy humour coming to be seen as “sympathetic to the nighttime, to the colour black and to the slowest of the planets, Saturn.”¹³

Humouristic medicine, however, is a long defunct medical paradigm whose explanatory power, from a scientific point of view, was unable to survive the discovery of the circulation of the blood and the rigors of modern anatomy. This means that by Zoshchenko’s time, released from its monologic, scientific meaning, the term was, to a large degree, left semantically adrift, and is thus endowed with a tantalizing metaphorical resonance and poetic suggestiveness. As Bridget Lyons has noted in the course of her work on melancholy in the English renaissance, this suggestive ambiguity makes for great literary potential.¹⁴ But, more than this, it

¹¹ B G Lyons, *Voices of Melancholy: Studies in Literary Treatments of Melancholy in Renaissance England* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), p.2.

¹² Ibid, p.2.

¹³ M Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), sv “Melancholy”.

¹⁴ B G Lyons, *Voices of Melancholy*, p. xv and p.1.

allows the term an elasticity capable of capturing the surplus of subjective meaning, which, although important to the individual melancholic, must, by necessity, always remain beyond the ken of the scientific method. It would thus seem to offer a promising linguistic vehicle for making subjective sense out of apparently senseless suffering.

Moving beyond etymology to discuss the condition itself, the *Brokgauz-Efron* entry for '*Melankholiia*' characterises the condition as "gloomy madness" ("*mrachnoe pomeshatel'stvo*"), arguing that:

The essence of the mental changes during m[elancholia] consist in the fact that the subject finds himself in a sad, depressed mood, unjustified, or inadequately justified, by external circumstances, and that his mental activity is generally accompanied by unpleasant, morbid torments.¹⁵

This sense of grief in excess of ostensible cause, axiomatic to most definitions of melancholy and depression, is extended to convey the sense in which melancholia functions to belie external reality when "absurd, delirious ideas and tricks of the senses arise on the soil of this oppressed condition of the psyche."¹⁶ The understanding of melancholia adumbrated in the *Brokgauz-Efron* embraces all the varied symptomatology that is often associated with melancholic suffering (such as all-encompassing, oppressive sadness, pessimism, guilt, self-loathing, insomnia, lethargy and refusal of food), but it consistently and forcefully stresses these in the context of "fantasy" ("*fantaziia*"), "delirious ideas" ("*bredovye idei*") or "delusions" ("*obmany chuvstva*").¹⁷ Thus, in its portrayal of the condition, the *Brokgauz-Efron*

¹⁵ «Сущность психических изменений при М. заключается в том, что субъект находится в печальном, подавленном настроении, немотивированном или недостаточно мотивированном внешними обстоятельствами, и что психическая деятельность его вообще сопровождается неприятными, болезненными мучениями.» *Slovar' F A Brokgauza i I A Efrona*, sv "Melankholiia".

¹⁶ «На почве этого угнетаемого состояния духа возникают нелепые бредовые идеи и обманы чувства.» Ibid, sv "Melankholiia".

¹⁷ Ibid, sv "Melankholiia".

underlines the extent to which melancholia is a self-imposed abstraction from reality which encloses the sufferer in a stifling solipsism.

All this perhaps offers some clue as to Zoshchenko's preference for the term 'melankholiia'. As this study progresses, this sense of something originating in the past, best approached by suggestion and metaphor, and ultimately characterised by obsessive private delusions which distance the sufferer from reality, will appear increasingly germane to Zoshchenko's understanding of melancholy. But more than this, the entry reveals the limits, alluded to earlier, of a strictly objective scientific understanding of the condition. For all its scholarly rigour, the encyclopaedic approach of the *Brokgauz-Efron* is unable to provide any indication of the psychological or biological mechanics that underlie the symptoms it lists. Despite a detailed dissection of melancholia in purely symptomatic terms, no insight, physiological or psychological, scientific or speculative, is offered into the aetiology of the condition. This means that, despite a reasonably lengthy entry, the work offers remarkably little guidance to sufferers in making sense of their condition. The definition of melancholia offered here seems to be poised between a form of innate "feeble-mindedness" ("slaboumie"), and a kind of obsessive delusion that would not look out of place in one of Gogol's Petersburg tales.¹⁸ Moreover the vague insistence that "a cure is best of all attained in specialised institutions" seems both unsatisfactory and evasive, especially as the encyclopaedic curiosity of the author of the entry does not extend to relating what these specialised cures might entail.¹⁹

Sigmund Freud (1859–1939)

¹⁸ Ibid, sv "Melankholiia".

¹⁹ «Лечение лучше всего производится в специальных заведениях.» Ibid, sv "Melankholiia".

In addition to the above, Zoshchenko's understanding of melancholia could not fail to have been influenced by a body of thought which, in the early twentieth century, made the term its own: namely Freudian psychoanalysis. The widespread interest in, and prevalence of, Freudian ideas in Russia in the twenties is attested to and examined in detail by Alexander Etkind, who also shows how far the influence of psychoanalysis extended beyond academic and clinical circles, noting in particular how "concepts borrowed from psychoanalysis began appearing in literary discourse."²⁰ Moreover, Zoshchenko's own interest in Freud has been documented by Thomas Hodge in an article which, in the process of analysing the Freudian aspects of *Before Sunrise*, offers detailed evidence of Zoshchenko's interest in, and access to, Freudian works in Russian translation, both in editions published before and after the revolution.²¹ In view of this it will now be gainful to examine Freudian melancholia in some depth.

Although the term 'melancholia' has a long history in psycho-analytic thought that stretches back to the *fin-de-siècle* origins of the movement, its first systematic treatment came in an important essay entitled 'Mourning and Melancholia' (*Trauer und Melancholie*), written by Freud in 1915 but not published until two years later.²² This delay was due to the fact that the essay was originally conceived as part of a planned volume entitled *Preliminaries to a Metapsychology* (*Zur Vorbereitung einer Metapsychologie*) which was intended "to provide a stable theoretical foundation for psycho-analysis."²³ That the planned metapsychological volume was never completed is less significant for the interests of this study than the fact that it reveals Freudian

²⁰ A Etkind, *Eros of the Impossible*, p.180.

²¹ T P Hodge, 'Freudian Elements', pp. 9-10.

²² See Editor's Note to 'Mourning and Melancholia' in S Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Vintage, 2001), Vol. 14, pp. 239-240.

²³ See Editor's Note to 'Papers on Metapsychology' in S Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Vintage, 2001), Vol. 14, p. 105.

melancholia to be less of a clinical category *per se*, than a means to a theoretical end. For, to a large degree, Freud used the very semantic ambiguity and scientific inexactitude of the term, suggested earlier in this discussion, as a background against which to articulate his own subject-centered theory of the psyche. Thus, at the outset of his paper, Freud acknowledges the terminological inexactitude and varying symptomatology entailed by use of the term melancholia, “whose definition fluctuates even in descriptive psychiatry”, and which “takes on various clinical forms the grouping together of which into a single unity does not seem to be established with certainty.”²⁴

However, he finds a way out of this symptomalogical confusion by comparing melancholia with the affect of mourning. After listing the typical mental features of melancholia, he notes the symptomatological similarities between melancholia and mourning, finding that with the exception of “the disturbance in self-regard”, which is particular to melancholia, “the same traits are met with in mourning.”²⁵ Thus by understanding mourning, Freud suggests that sense can be made of melancholia as well. Mourning is conceived of as the psychological work required in order to overcome object loss. In psychoanalytic terms, objects (both things and people) assume importance for the subject as a result of libidinal cathexes, or investments of psychical energy which are explicitly conceived of as sexual in the Freudian sense. Once such a libidinal object-relation becomes vitiated as a result of externally-driven change or loss, Freud suggests that the subject’s libidinal investment in the lost object is withdrawn:

²⁴ S Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. J Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), Vol. 14, p. 243.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 244.

Each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hypercathected, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it.²⁶

Freud sees the magnitude of this task as accounting for the long period of inhibition that characterizes mourning, during the course of which “the lost object is psychologically prolonged” in the mind of the subject until the work of mourning is completed and the subject “becomes free and uninhibited again”, ready to seek new psychological relations in the world outside.²⁷ Mourning thus serves as a psychological mechanism allowing the psyche to maintain some sort of synchronicity with a dynamic external reality and remain rooted, albeit tenuously, in the world of the here and now.

Having established its similarity to mourning, Freud then begins to conceptualize melancholia in terms of object loss as well. However, as it rapidly becomes clear, melancholia frequently entails a different kind of loss to that encountered in mourning, for it is not always obvious what has been lost in the case of melancholia. Freud notes that sometimes it can appear that the loss is “of a more ideal kind”, or else that the motivating loss is clear “only in the sense that [the sufferer] knows whom he has lost, but not what he has lost in him.”²⁸ This suggestively-cryptic phrase becomes a little less opaque when it is remembered that the symptom that distinguishes melancholia from mourning is the dramatic erosion of self-regard. In psychoanalytic theory the seat of the conscious self is termed the ego, something more obvious in the original German – *das Ich*, literally “the I”. Thus Freud interprets the diminution in self-regard characteristic of melancholia as pointing as much to a loss in relation to the self (the ego) as to a direct loss in respect of a loved object: “In

²⁶ Ibid, p. 245.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 245.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 245.

mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself.”²⁹

In order to understand exactly what is meant by this notion of ego-loss it is necessary to delve deeper into the Freudian understanding of object relations, and in particular to turn to Freud’s earlier essay ‘On Narcissism: An Introduction’ (*‘Zur Einführung des Narzissmus’*, 1914). In trying to understand what motivates and characterizes object choices, Freud postulated two possible libidinal alternatives: “a person may love” either “according to the narcissistic type” or “according to the anaclitic (attachment) type”.³⁰ In this latter type, the subject seeks libidinal satisfaction in objects that resemble his carers in infancy, namely “the woman who feeds him” and “the man who protects him”.³¹ In the narcissistic scenario the subject chooses objects motivated by their resemblance to himself; or, more accurately, “what he himself is (i.e. himself), what he himself was, what he himself would like to be, [or] someone who was once part of himself.”³² Importantly, neither the anaclitic nor the narcissistic scenarios represent exclusive options, much less human character types, but are deployed in combinations in relation to particular objects and libidinal drives: “we assume [...] that both kinds of object-choice are open to each individual, though he may show a preference for one or the other.”³³ In a sense, this is a theory of love which is founded on the two-fold nature of that emotion; a nature which is most often expressed in everyday wisdom as: ‘in order to love, one must first love oneself’. Indeed, in Freud’s schema one must *first* love oneself, for Freud postulates a stage of

²⁹ Ibid, p. 246.

³⁰ S Freud, ‘On Narcissism: An Introduction’ in S Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Vintage, 2001), Vol. 14, p. 90.

³¹ Ibid, p. 90.

³² Ibid, p. 90.

³³ Ibid, p. 88.

“primary narcissism” in the infant, on which all subsequent object relations, narcissistic or otherwise, are constructed.³⁴

This infant narcissism, which corresponds to Freud’s oral stage, is a period of all-embracing solipsism that precedes the proper formation of the ego, a period when the subject has not yet developed a sense of the self as a distinct entity separable from the world of objects. In accordance with the infant’s need for oral satisfactions, it is a period characterized by the desire to introject, to incorporate, the object into itself. However, this desire to merge with the object is unsustainable and ultimately the subject must break out into a more complex relation with the world of objects. Just as in the original myth where Narcissus’s total absorption with his own reflection led to his withering away, so the infant that wants to survive in a dynamic world that exceeds itself must break out of this stifling self-absorption. Thus, the subject must come to seek satisfaction beyond his original libidinal cathexis of the self by acquiring love objects, on both a narcissistic and anaclytic basis, in the world beyond the self. Freud illustrates this process with a biological simile, in which he sees the extension of libido from this primary cathexis of the self onto external objects as analogous to the temporary protoplasmic protrusions of unicellular organisms:

Thus we form the idea of there being an original libidinal cathexis of the ego, from which some is later given off to objects, but which fundamentally persists and is related to the object-cathexes much as the body of an amoeba is related to the pseudopodia which it puts out.³⁵

What is important here is that even with the onset of object love, self-love cannot be entirely overcome, because for Freud’s cytological metaphor to hold true, no matter how much libido is directed towards external objects, there must always remain a

³⁴ Ibid, p. 88.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 75.

reservoir of libido directed towards the ego. Moreover, in accordance with Freud's metaphor above, the relation of libido directed outwards towards objects (object-libido) to that directed at the ego itself (ego-libido) is underpinned by an economic logic:

We also see, broadly speaking, an antithesis between ego-libido and object-libido. The more of the one is employed, the more the other becomes depleted.³⁶

What is also clear from this metaphor is the provisional nature of object-libido. Just as pseudopodia are temporary cellular extensions, so libido is extended out into the world of objects from the ego on a temporary basis and can then be withdrawn when those objects are lost, to be re-directed either to other objects through the process of mourning, or to a secondary narcissistic cathexis of the ego.

It is this secondary narcissistic cathexis of the ego that is the pathological agent in Freudian melancholia. When an "object choice has been effected on a narcissistic basis" and this object-cathexis becomes vitiated by external change or loss, it can "regress to narcissism."³⁷ In this case, libido is "not displaced on to another object" as it is in mourning, but serves "to establish an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object."³⁸ In this way, the loss of a loved object in the external world is internalized and the object relation is preserved in the ego beyond its existence in reality.

The narcissistic identification with the object then becomes a substitute for the erotic cathexis, the result of which is that in spite of the conflict with the loved person the love-relation need not be given up.³⁹

³⁶ Ibid, p. 76.

³⁷ 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 249.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 249; italics in the original.

³⁹ Ibid, p. 249.

In this scenario, a loss in the outside world has thus been transformed, in a very real sense, into a loss of self, or as Freud described it, with just a touch of gothic foreboding: “Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego.”⁴⁰ This sense of gothic is perhaps appropriate for, in a significant sense, the dead object, now divorced from reality, is entombed in the mind, where it is idealized by the process of identification. Importantly, this regression to narcissism represents a retreat from engagement with the external world because, in terms of the economic relationship between ego-libido and object-libido established above, the increased libidinal interest in the self represented by this secondary narcissistic cathexis of the ego can only be achieved at the expense of object love. According to Freud, melancholia results when the subject resorts excessively to this kind of regression to narcissism as a strategy for coping with object-loss. Thus, he suggests that “melancholia [...] borrows some of its features from mourning, and the others from the process of regression from narcissistic object-choice to [a secondary] narcissism.”⁴¹

At this point, the question arises as to exactly what form this secondary narcissism takes, or more particularly how the ego-libido withdrawn from object-cathexes is actually deployed. In the case of secondary narcissism, Freud sees the identificatory mechanisms of primary infant narcissism transferred onto an “ideal ego” which becomes for the subject “the substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood in which he was his own ideal.”⁴² This ego ideal is an ideal self against which the actual self is relentlessly compared and found wanting. Its origins lie in “the critical influence” of the subject’s parents and, later on, that of “those who trained and taught him and the innumerable and unidentifiable host of all the other

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 249.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 250.

⁴² ‘On Narcissism’, p. 94.

people in his environment – his fellow men – and public opinion.”⁴³ It is the ego-ideal which, in Freud’s view, underlies the ethical urge in man and it is experienced by the subject as the voice of conscience.⁴⁴ Thus, “the institution of conscience” comes to be conceived as “an embodiment, first of parental criticism, and subsequently of that of society”.⁴⁵ For Freud, the ethical imperative in a given individual does not originate in “a merely intellectual knowledge” of ethical ideals, rather there is a psychological logic which forces the subject to recognize such ideals “as a standard for himself” and to submit “to the claims they make on him.”⁴⁶ This voice of conscience is, for Freud, a narcissistic construct which results when “large amounts of libido [...] are drawn into the formation of the narcissistic ego ideal and find outlet and satisfaction in maintaining it.”⁴⁷ This provocative equating of conscience with self-love is of great importance for Freudian melancholia. As has been seen above, in melancholia the withdrawal of object-libido results in a surfeit of ego-libido which finds an outlet in the narcissistic identification with the lost object. This identification forms part of the sedimentary identifications which comprise the ego-ideal. The propensity of the melancholic to resort to this kind of narcissistic internalization of object-loss leads to a disproportionately large narcissistic investment in the ego-ideal with the result that the sufferer also subjects himself to the relentlessly idealistic, and hugely unrealistic, demands of conscience. It is the inevitable failure before these demands, which are by definition divorced from reality, that accounts for the acute guilt and diminution in self-regard which are the distinguishing traits of melancholia for Freud.

⁴³ Ibid, p. 96.

⁴⁴ The ego-ideal as articulated in ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ would be developed by Freud into his concept of the super-ego in his 1923 work ‘The Ego and the Id’. S Freud, *The Ego and the Id* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Vintage, 2001), Vol. 19, pp. 28-39.

⁴⁵ ‘On Narcissism’, p. 96.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 93.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 96.

Psychological investment in the ego-ideal has to represent a retreat from external reality because libidinal cathexis of the ego, according to Freud, comes at the expense of object-libido. Thus Esther Sanchez-Pardo has suggested that Freudian melancholia represents “the misrecognition by the subject of the boundary between psychic and external reality.”⁴⁸ The importance of this aspect of Freudian melancholia for understanding Zoshchenko’s melancholic aesthetic is something that will become increasingly apparent as this study progresses. Freudian melancholia thus lies in the disjuncture between a self which is conceived statically and idealistically and the transience of the external world. Lying in the disputed liminal space between subjectivity and the external world, melancholia constitutes an inability to accept the transience of the world beyond the subject. Melancholic suffering results when the subject attempts to overcome this transience by internalizing the external world in a timeless, idealized sense of self. Yet the self is never large enough to absorb the complexity of the world and the result can only be a splitting of that ideal self along the fault line formed by its foundational ideal. It is this rooting of melancholic suffering in the idealization that results from the secondary narcissistic cathexes of the ego that is particularly interesting in all this. In the Freudian understanding, melancholia becomes, to a large degree, suffering at the hands of unattainable self-made ideals which can never be reconciled with reality. That these ideals are self-made is surely one of the most important insights that Freud offers into melancholic suffering, for the source of idealism, in its Freudian understanding, turns out to be neither nature, reason nor God, but a sedimentary, internalized accumulation of abstracted past realities, prototypically based on parental censure, that are reified out of their historical context and pitted, almost ridiculously, against the dynamic

⁴⁸ E Sanchez-Pardo, *Cultures of the Death Drive: Melanie Klein and Modernist Melancholia* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 44.

complexity of material reality. The importance of this for Zoshchenko's own developing understanding of melancholia is something that this study will try to demonstrate throughout.

Melanie Klein (1882–1960)

If Zoshchenko's understanding of melancholia bears obvious traces of his debt to Freud, the same cannot be said in regard to subsequent developments in psychoanalytic understandings of melancholic suffering. Alexander Etkind has noted the way in which the fortunes of psychoanalysis in the Soviet Union waxed and waned in close relation to the career of its highest placed enthusiast: Lev Trotsky. The height of psychoanalytic influence in the Soviet Union during the early twenties coincided closely with the high-point of Trotsky's career in government and party. Likewise, its stagnation and eventual demise date from around 1926 or 1927, by which time Trotsky's United Opposition had been defeated and he had lost his place on the Central Committee of the Party. The final vestiges of psychoanalytic theory and practice were forced to the margins of Soviet life by the late twenties and early thirties, just as Trotsky was expelled from the Soviet Union and his supporters were purged en masse.⁴⁹ In this way, psychoanalysts in the Soviet Union remained largely isolated from developments in psychoanalytic theory and practice that occurred after this point. With this in mind, it must be considered highly unlikely that Zoshchenko ever encountered Melanie Klein's development of the Freudian concept of melancholia. However, although Klein's re-writing of Freudian melancholia offers no direct insight into Zoshchenko's use of the term, as a European contemporary of Zoshchenko her work in this area represents an interesting historical counterpoint. Furthermore, it can provide a valuable, comparative theoretical perspective from

⁴⁹ A Etkind, *Eros of the Impossible*, pp. 241-243.

which to illuminate Zoshchenko's own psychoanalytically-influenced writings on melancholia.

Melanie Klein reached a revised and controversial psychoanalytic understanding of melancholia through a life-long interest in child analysis. Her elaboration, and substantial re-thinking, of the Freudian concept of melancholia came to fruition in two papers: 'A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States' from 1934 and 'Mourning and its Relation to Manic-Depressive States' from 1938.⁵⁰ It is interesting to note how closely these dates coincide with the period in which Zoshchenko was undertaking his most systematic and explicit treatment of the theme of melancholy in the works *Youth Restored*, published in 1933, and *Before Sunrise*, which was worked on from 1934 and published in part in 1943.⁵¹ Yet the similarities between their respective interests in melancholia go beyond simple chronological correlation. Like Zoshchenko, Klein also wrote against the background of a personal history of melancholic affliction; she was prey to a great deal of depressive suffering in the course of a life that was marred by an unhappy marriage and traumatic bereavement. Her student and biographer Hanna Segal has noted "the lasting streak of depression which was part of Melanie's personality."⁵² It was during analysis for her depression, first by Sándor Ferenczi in Budapest and later by Karl Abraham in Berlin, that Klein first became seriously drawn to the practice of psychoanalysis. Moreover, her first systematic theoretical contribution to the psychoanalytic understanding of melancholia, the paper 'A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States', first saw light of day in August 1934, a

⁵⁰ The dates above relate to the first presentation of the papers rather than their first appearance in print. 'A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States' was presented to the International Congress of Psycho-Analysis at Lucerne in August 1934, and was published in 1935. 'Mourning and its Relation to Manic-Depressive States' was presented to the British Psycho-Analytical Society in October 1938, before appearing in print in 1940.

⁵¹ Iu V Tomashevskii, 'Khronologicheskai kanva', pp. 352-359.

⁵² H Segal, *Klein* (London: Karnac, 2002), p. 30.

mere four months after the early death of her eldest son Hans in a climbing accident. The depth of her suffering in the wake of this traumatic event and the way in which it reawakened painful memories of past losses found explicit reflection in the account of a bereaved mother that she included in her 1938 paper; an account which was hugely informed by, and largely derived from, her own experience of losing a child.⁵³ But, perhaps more strikingly, both Zoshchenko's and Klein's attempts to systematically think through their melancholy took place against the background of increasingly militant totalitarianisms which threatened to destroy the cultural milieux of their formative years. Although Klein lived in London from 1926, her work on the depressive position from 1934 to 1940 must be read against the growing tide of Nazi repression that would ultimately come to obliterate the Central-European, Jewish intellectual world of her youth and early adulthood. Zoshchenko's systematic engagement with melancholia can be seen in similar terms, for at broadly the same time the Soviet Union was subject to radical social change and feeling the bite of growing political repression whose ultimate onslaught would irrevocably change, if not totally destroy, the remnants of the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia of Zoshchenko's formative years.

Following Freud, Klein located melancholia in the disputed liminal space between self and world, seeing melancholic suffering as a result of the psychic internalization of external object-loss, or, more particularly, "the real loss of a real object, or some similar situation having the same significance, [which] results in the object becoming installed within the ego."⁵⁴ However, she questioned whether the simple fact of introjection was sufficient in itself to explain melancholia, and in the process came to complicate the largely monocausal Freudian account of the condition:

⁵³ Ibid, p. 74.

⁵⁴ M Klein, 'A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States' in *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921-1945* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), p. 263.

Now, why is it that the process of introjection is so specific for melancholia? I believe that the main difference between incorporation in paranoia and in melancholia is connected with changes in the relation of the subject to the object, though it is also a question of a change in the constitution of the introjecting ego.⁵⁵

What is distinctive here is the significance that Klein places on two aspects of the melancholic condition: firstly, the nature of the cognitive relation of the subject to the lost object and secondly, the fact that this relation is determined as a result of changes in the ego in the course of psychic development. These two linked observations lead her to develop her notion of the depressive position which she comes to see as a cognitive stage which, although underlying all melancholic suffering, represents psychological challenges that must be engaged with and resolved by the developing ego of any psychological subject. Importantly, this is not another one of the stages that structure the infantile development of the classic Freudian subject, which are encountered and overcome in sequence and at specific ages. Rather it represents the specific psychological challenges that the subject must face as his developing ego places him in a particular relation to the world of objects. Although Klein places the onset of this stage during the second quarter of the life of the infant, in an important sense the specific anxieties that derive from it are never conclusively overcome and it remains as a potential psychological scenario that can be, and frequently is, reactivated depending on circumstances and particular object relations throughout the life of the subject. It is for this reason that Klein prefers the term position to phase.⁵⁶

In opposition to the Freudian account, Klein does not demand that the infant pass through a monadic primary narcissism. Rather the infant ego, whose development is “governed by the mechanisms of introjection and projection”, must

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 263.

⁵⁶ Ibid, pp. 275-276.

define itself through engagement with the world of objects from the moment of birth.⁵⁷ Objects are introjected, taken inside and incorporated into the personality of the subject. There they are deemed to be 'good' in so far as they provide satisfaction, while objects which frustrate are deemed 'bad' and are subjected to the "aggression" and "sadistic impulses" of the infant which are projected out of the self onto these bad objects making them appear persecutory.⁵⁸ These mechanisms, which Klein sees as strategies for managing the violently entropic impulses that Freud termed the death drive, give rise to both 'good' and 'bad' objects, "for both of which the mother's breast is the prototype".⁵⁹ The breast is the prototypical internal object because it is the first object that the infant encounters after birth and thus forms the pattern on which all subsequent objects are incorporated. These good and bad breasts, and the other good and bad objects that are later subject to similar mental processing, become "a phantastically distorted picture of the real objects upon which they are based".⁶⁰ Importantly, they are part-objects: whereas the breast is an organic unity, Klein argues that in the infantile psyche its satisfying and frustrating aspects are kept separate "as excessively good and excessively bad figures".⁶¹ These primal psychic processes fashion similar constructions out of other objective unities resulting in idealised 'good' and 'bad' objects.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 262.

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 262.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 262. There is an interesting point of cross-over here with Zoshchenko's analysis of his own melancholia. As shall become clear in the last chapter of the present study, the "breast" (грудь) assumes great importance in Zoshchenko's own understanding of his neurotic complex, especially when it is connected with the "hand" (pyka), leading him to locate his neurosis in a traumatic weaning (See *Pered voskhodom solntsa*, 3:608-611). Interestingly, Klein also locates the onset of the depressive position during weaning (See "Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States", p. 287). Although Freud stressed the importance of the breast in anaclytic object choice (see 'On Narcissism', p. 88), he places neither the same emphasis on it as either Zoshchenko and Klein appear to, nor accords it a significant role in his concept of melancholia, for which, it will be recalled, narcissistic object choice is the motivating factor.

⁶⁰ 'Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States', p. 262. Melanie Klein adheres to the common British psychoanalytic convention of spelling fantasy with a 'ph' as a means of distancing her intended usage from the additional connotations of day-dream or harmless reverie which adhere to the usual English term: phantasy in Klein's usage is a purely unconscious activity.

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 286.

All this takes place during the developmental phase that Freud insisted was dominated by oral satisfactions. Thus the primal processes of introjection and projection are, not coincidentally, psychological correlates of the alimentary processes of ingestion and excretion. When objects are introjected they are taken into the body in the fullest, psychological sense; they are installed in the developing ego, becoming embedded in the developing personality where they are felt “to be live people” which constitute a whole “inner world”.⁶² Meanwhile, the developing ego also projects qualities out onto external objects as a means of venting the inexhaustible reserves of aggression that Klein sees lurking in the depths of the infant psyche. The effect of these processes is the creation of two planes of object-relation in the very young child, whereby “there exist, side by side with its relations to real objects – but on a different plane, as it were – relations to its unreal imagos”.⁶³ Klein holds that these inner and outer worlds, although largely shrouded from consciousness, persist throughout the life of the subject, demanding the subject perform a delicate psychological balancing act in order to maintain a proper alignment between them.

Yet these two planes of object-relation should not be understood as completely separate either, rather they “intermingle and colour each other to an ever-increasing degree in the course of development.”⁶⁴ In fact, it is precisely this ego development which leads to the onset of the depressive position, for with increasing development of the ego “the internalised imagos will correspond more closely to reality.”⁶⁵ In other words, the subject begins to perceive “more and more the whole person of the mother”, a mother that unites both the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ breasts.⁶⁶ Gradually “this

⁶² M Klein, ‘Mourning and its Relation to Manic-Depressive States’ in *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921-1945* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), p. 345.

⁶³ ‘Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States’, p. 286.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 286.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 264.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

more realistic perception moves to the world beyond the mother” to begin to unite the other phantastically distorted part-objects which the infant mind has hitherto kept separate.⁶⁷ However, this important perceptual step, undoubtedly an advance in aligning the subject with external reality, also incurs the specific anxiety complex that Klein terms the depressive position. The bad objects, which have hitherto been the focus of sadistic aggression and functioned as a seemingly harmless outlet for the infant’s inexhaustible capacity for blind aggression, now turn out to be inseparable from the good objects which endow the infant with a sense of security and on which his growing erotic attachment to the world is based. When these opposite qualities are united in perception of the whole object, the infant’s loved object suddenly dissolves in a despairing ambivalence. The collapse of the loved object immediately jeopardises the infant’s engagement with the external world of objects. It is for this reason that:

The loss of the loved object [and thus the onset of the depressive position] takes place during that phase of development in which the ego makes the transition from partial to total incorporation of the object.⁶⁸

In addition to this debilitating ambivalence, with the incorporation of the whole object comes the infant’s realisation “of the state of disintegration to which it has reduced and is continuing to reduce its loved object” through sadistic aggression directed at the bad aspects of it.⁶⁹ More than just threatened by ambivalence, the loved object has actually been subjected to the sustained sadistic torments of the infant who believed he was persecuting an ideally bad object, rather than the ‘bad’ aspect of a loved object.

The ego then finds itself confronted with the psychic reality that its loved objects are in a state of dissolution – in bits – and the despair,

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 285.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p. 267.

⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 269.

remorse and anxiety deriving from this recognition are at the bottom of numerous anxiety-situations.⁷⁰

This realisation of the broken, tattered nature of the internal loved objects, of the psychic rubble within, finds reflection, for Klein, in the clinical observation that depressed patients frequently experience “the dread of harbouring dying or dead objects” within and are prone to “an identification of the ego with objects in this condition.”⁷¹ The psychological importance of this becomes even clearer when it is remembered that the subject’s inner objects are experienced as living people within. But more than this, in an important sense, the infant becomes psychically aware of his own culpability in the dissolution of his good objects. This “remorse” derives from the infant’s implication, albeit inadvertent, in the destruction of its own good objects;⁷² the “despair” represents what Klein characterised as a “pining” for the loss of the ideally-good loved object.⁷³ This accounts for the melancholic aspect of the depressive position, which Klein later characterised as “melancholia in *statu nascendi*” in reflection of her belief that melancholic suffering in adults represented a re-activation of, or prolonged failure to resolve, the depressive position.⁷⁴

The unresolved depressive position represents a dangerous state of affairs from a psychological viewpoint. Klein notes that “the sorrow, feelings of guilt and the despair which underlie grief” in the depressive position also signify “the ego’s unconscious knowledge that the hate is indeed there, as well as the love”; for there is a persecuting hatred at the heart of the individual psyche that is always threatening “to

⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 269.

⁷¹ Ibid, p. 266.

⁷² This sense of guilt before an internal object of identification has obvious similarities with Freud’s notion of the ego-ideal related above, except that, in a major revision of Freud, Klein introduces this infant super-ego before the onset of the Oedipus conflict.

⁷³ ‘Mourning and Manic-Depressive States’, p. 348.

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 345.

get the upper hand”.⁷⁵ The full importance of this fact is only apparent when it is remembered that “the hate” derives from the inexhaustible destructive resources of the death drive. Thus, melancholia forces the sufferer to confront the fact of their own death drive. Meanwhile the destruction and loss of the good, loved objects deprives the infant of his most important defence against the onslaughts of this same death drive, leaving him exposed to the uninhibited destructive force of his own aggression, which, through the primal processes of introjection and projection, creates a terrifying pantheon of external and internal persecutors:

The dread of persecution which was at first felt on the ego’s account, now relates to the good object as well and from now on preservation of the good object is regarded as synonymous with the survival of the ego.⁷⁶

Helpless before his own merciless death drive, the infant is now faced with the terrifying prospect of the dissolution of his ego, the unravelling of his very sense of self.

In order to move beyond the depressive position and thus to re-stabilise the psyche, the maturing ego has to rebuild the lost loved objects inside, it has to somehow overcome the ambivalence and fear which characterise the depressive position and, by an enormous effort of libidinal investment, come “to secure his *good internalized* object, i.e. to possess himself of it”.⁷⁷ In this undertaking, Klein stresses the way in which the subject works through the remorse that accompanies the depressive position through acts of reparation to the damaged loved object:

The pining for the lost loved object also implies dependence on it, but dependence of a kind which becomes an incentive to reparation and preservation of the object.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ ‘Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States’, pp. 270-271.

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 264.

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 267; italics as per the original.

⁷⁸ ‘Mourning and Manic-Depressive States’, p. 360.

By reparation, Klein means the sublimation of psychological repair into creative acts in the external world. This important Kleinian notion predates her work on the depressive position, deriving from her reading of an article by Karin Michaelis contained in the 1929 paper ‘Infantile Anxiety-Situations Reflected in a Work of Art and in the Collective Impulse’.⁷⁹ This work sought to explain the story of a woman who relieved her depressive symptoms by painting pictures of her relatives, without any prior knowledge of the art of portraiture. Klein interpreted the spontaneous urge to paint as growing out of “the desire to make reparation, to make good the injury psychologically done to the mother”.⁸⁰ With her delineation of the depressive position this insight took on greater meaning, as Klein came to suggest that, in the words of her biographer Julia Kristeva, “the work of art” as a means of reparation “provides a way to re-create the harmony of the inner world and to maintain tolerable relations with the outside”.⁸¹ Noting that for the subject in the depressive position “it is a ‘perfect’ [internalized] object which is in pieces”, Klein suggests that “perfection” pursued through artistic endeavour is a sublimation of the desire to restore internal order:

It appears that the desire for perfection is rooted in the depressive anxiety of disintegration, which is thus of great importance in all sublimations.⁸²

As Kristeva has noted, this notion of the reparative nature of “artistic creation” elevates it to being “more than just a diagnostic tool”, and something which “can also serve as an initial – and perhaps even an optimal – way of caring for other people”,

⁷⁹ M Klein, ‘Infantile Anxiety-Situations Reflected in a Work of Art and in the Creative Impulse’ in *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921-1945* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), pp. 213-218.

⁸⁰ ‘Infantile Anxiety-Situations’, p. 218.

⁸¹ J Kristeva, *Melanie Klein*, trans. R Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), p. 188.

⁸² ‘Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States’, p. 270.

arguing that Klein's notion of the "the work of art" as reparation allows it to function "as an autoanalytic activity".⁸³ This insight, which Kristeva was to develop further in her own writings on melancholia, is of great importance in understanding the autoanalytic claims that Zoshchenko made of his own works.

The sense in which reparative phantasies implicitly link actions in the external world with inner realities finds reflection in the other strategy that Klein proposes for overcoming the depressive position: the process of mourning. Following Freud, Klein emphasises mourning as a process characterised by "the testing of reality" which strives to synchronise the subject with the external world.⁸⁴ Yet Klein's notion of mourning is not concerned solely with the displacement of erotic cathexis in response to object-loss and does not exist in opposition to internalised inner objects as it does in the Freudian schema. Rather its workings are intimately connected with synchronizing and integrating the two planes of perception analyzed above: the inner and outer worlds of the subject.

As has been shown above, Klein sees the inner and outer mental worlds as being interrelated.

In the baby's mind, the 'internal' mother is bound up with the 'external' one, of whom she is a 'double', though one which at once undergoes alterations in his mind through the very process of internalization.⁸⁵

These alterations represent the influence of "phantasies", "internal stimuli and internal experiences of all kinds".⁸⁶ Being the prototypical object, what holds true for the mother likewise holds true for all the other objects which are subject to the same psychological processes. What is important here is the way in which the world of

⁸³ J Kristeva, *Melanie Klein*, pp. 187-188.

⁸⁴ 'Mourning and Manic-Depressive States', p. 344.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p. 346.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 346.

internal objects is derived from the world of external objects. The internalised objects form a kind of double, shadow world deep in the psyche, a world characterized by attenuated reflections of external objects that Sanchez-Pardo describes as “simulacra”.⁸⁷ However, the world of internal objects is felt beyond the reach of conscious thought, is “inaccessible to the child’s accurate observation and judgement, and cannot be verified by the means of perception which are available in connection with the tangible and palpable object-world”.⁸⁸ Yet, as they are ultimately derived from the external world of objects which are amenable to perceptual verification and rational reflection, the subject is afforded some insight into, and influence over, his inner phantastic world by turning to the external world of objects. Thus the “doubts, uncertainties and anxieties” arising from the depressive position:

[..] act as a continuous incentive to the young child to observe and make sure about the external object-world, from which this inner world springs, and by these means to understand the internal one better.⁸⁹

This “continuous incentive” to seek insight into and proof of the goodness of the loved object in the external world should lead to a concerted effort towards the integration of external and internal objects through engaging with the external world. In the case of the infant attempting to resolve the depressive position:

All the enjoyments which the baby lives through in relation to his mother are so many proofs to him that the loved object *inside as well as outside* is not injured, is not turned into a vengeful person. The increase of love and trust, and the diminishing of fears through happy experiences, help the baby step by step to overcome his depression and feeling of loss (mourning). They enable him to test his inner reality by means of outer reality. Through being loved and through the enjoyment and comfort he has in relation to people his confidence in his own as well as in other people’s goodness becomes strengthened, his hope that his own ‘good’ objects and his

⁸⁷ E Sanchez-Pardo, *Cultures of the Death Drive*, p. 120.

⁸⁸ ‘Mourning and Manic-Depressive States’, p. 346.

⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 346.

own ego can be saved and preserved increases, at the same time as his ambivalence and acute fear of internal destruction diminish.⁹⁰

Here, the love and attentiveness of the ‘external’ mother provide a means of proving the goodness of the ‘internal’ mother and thus of saving and re-building the loved internal object. In this illustration of the Kleinian process of infant mourning, which forms the basis of mourning throughout the life of the subject, what is important is the extent of reliance on the observable goodness of others, particularly the mother. For, just as a ‘good’ mother can disprove the persecutory phantasies of the infant depressive position, so a ‘bad’ mother can “increase ambivalence, diminish trust and hope and confirm anxieties about inner annihilation and external persecution”.⁹¹

In all of this, it must be remembered that the depressive position underlies all melancholic suffering, both in the infant and in the adult. Thus, just as “the child’s relation to his mother, her actual presence, is of the greatest help” in overcoming the depressive position through the integrative process of mourning, so if the adult mourner “has people whom he loves and who share his grief, and if he can accept their sympathy, the restoration of the harmony in his inner world is promoted, and his fears and distress are more quickly reduced.”⁹² The insight here is clear: the way out of melancholic suffering lies not in retreat into the destructive cross-currents of the self, but in forcing engagement with the world and particularly in the understanding and kindness of others. Thus Klein asserts that:

The extent to which external reality is able to disprove anxieties and sorrow relating to the internal reality varies with each individual, but could be taken as one of the criteria for normality.⁹³

⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 347.

⁹¹ Ibid, p. 347.

⁹² Ibid, p. 362.

⁹³ Ibid, p. 346.

It is important to note, however, that the drive for integration that leads the subject beyond the depressive position is never finally achieved. The kind of integration achieved through mourning in the Kleinian model is really much more of a *bricolage* than the neater Freudian account of the process. In a sense, where Freud emphasises the outcome of the process of mourning, Klein always emphasises the process itself; more particularly, she emphasises its ongoing provisional nature. Thus Sanchez-Pardo has characterised “the Kleinian psychic system” as something “always in flux and unsettled, always in a precarious, contingent, and transitory unfinished state.”⁹⁴ As will become clear later in this study, Klein’s messy, provisional theory of subjectivity provides one of the most fertile points of comparison with the theory of melancholia that emerges in the course of reading Zoshchenko’s works, and so it is worth understanding in some detail.

The gradual overcoming of the idealised part-objects that constitutes the integration of the ego contradictorily sees each integrative step being followed by a “renewed splitting of the imagos” into ‘good’ and ‘bad’, internal and external.⁹⁵ However, this apparently retrograde step is coupled with integrative advance:

As the adaptation to the external world increases, this splitting is carried out on planes which gradually become increasingly nearer and nearer to reality. This goes on until love for the real and the internalized objects and trust in them are well established.⁹⁶

This ‘two steps forward, one step back’ process really constitutes a dialectical relationship between inner and outer realities. Outer reality is refracted through the cognitive lens of inner psychic patterns, whilst simultaneously pushing that inner psychic reality into greater integration with external reality. Thus:

⁹⁴ E Sanchez-Pardo, *Cultures of the Death Drive*, p. 131.

⁹⁵ ‘Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States’, p. 288.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 288.

In the process of acquiring knowledge, every new piece of experience has to be fitted into the patterns provided by the psychic reality which prevails at the time; whilst the psychic reality of the child is gradually influenced by every step in his progressive knowledge of external reality.⁹⁷

The synthetic outcome of this dialectical interaction is the production of meaning, a meaning rooted in both external and internal realities. Thus the aim of mourning and integration are not simply the effacement of the internalized objects by external ones, but rather the attainment of a deeper and reinvigorated attachment to primal inner realities through the external world of the here and now.

It seems that every advance in the process of mourning results in a deepening in the individual's relation to his inner objects, in the happiness of regaining them after they were felt to be lost [...], in an increased trust in them and love for them because they proved to be good and helpful after all."⁹⁸

The important thing here is that integration and engagement in external reality must, in effect, carry the internal, psychic reality of the perceiver with it. In other words, meaning must possess purchase in both the external world and in the inner world of the subject. When the subject fails to find sufficient support in external reality for his inner psychic world, or when this support is lost, then the depressive position is reactivated. Beyond this objectively identifiable object-loss, "the poignancy of the actual loss of a loved person [...] is greatly increased by the mourner's unconscious phantasies of having lost his *internal* 'good' objects as well."⁹⁹ Thus there is a kind of shadow mourning behind the mourning for an identifiable loss of a loved object which, being rooted in the unconscious is somehow beyond reasoned causality. Kleinian melancholia lies in this shadow mourning, in this reactivation of the infantile depressive position. Importantly, this makes melancholia into an aspect of human

⁹⁷ 'Mourning and Manic-Depressive States', p. 347.

⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 360.

⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 353.

subjectivity in the broadest sense; it becomes something that all endure as infants and which periodically re-visits each of us as the supplementary suffering beyond that attributable to loss in the here and now: “in mourning the subject goes through a modified and transitory manic-depressive state”.¹⁰⁰ The pathological aspect to it consists in the *prolonged* failure to secure the internalized good objects through integration of the self in the external world.

Just as with the Freudian account, melancholia in the Kleinian model comes to reside in the gulf between the psychic world and external reality. However, whereas the Freudian account of the condition stresses a kind of innateness, Klein re-casts the condition in terms of subject and world. Freud’s lonely melancholic driven into submission to his ego-ideal as a result of an apparently innate proclivity for narcissistic love seems cursed by fate into an irrevocable alienation from external reality. Klein’s depressive position, however, stresses the immanence of the condition, casting it as a universal aspect of the endless saga of human subjectivity. Moreover, she always leaves open the potential of becoming, for “the Kleinian depressive position” in many ways reveals human subjectivity to be “open and provisional”, in reality “a system that avoids fixity and closure.”¹⁰¹ The Kleinian subject is always locked in a relentless struggle to ground his inner world in the shifting sands of a dynamic, external reality, and thus to shore it up against the destructive pull of the depressive position which promises only an unending melancholia. In an important sense the psychological crisis of the depressive position is never completely resolved. Thus Sanchez-Pardo suggests:

Reparation and integration are only partial outcomes, never fully achieved, which bring about various ways of living with the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 354.

¹⁰¹ E Sanchez-Pardo, *Cultures of the Death Drive*, p. 133.

damage. The subject is founded upon the reproduction of a failure and the repetition of defensive strategies involving many kinds of splitting and idealization, countered by efforts toward integration and reparation under the stimulus of what is yet to come.¹⁰²

As this study progresses the notions of “living with the damage” and a “subject founded on the reproduction of a failure” whose struggle for existence is framed by “the stimulus of what is yet to come” will find repeated reflection in Zoshchenko’s writings from across the whole of his literary career.

Julia Kristeva (1941-)

Its Lacanian foundation notwithstanding, the work of Julia Kristeva, the Bulgarian-born, French psychoanalyst and academic linguist, betrays the marked influence of Melanie Klein. The Kleinian influence is acknowledged to some extent in Kristeva’s writing of the intellectual biography of Klein which was cited earlier in this chapter; the extent of the acknowledgement is implied by the fact that this work forms part of a biographical trilogy explicitly devoted to the exploration of “feminine genius”.¹⁰³ Given the importance of the theme for Klein, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Kleinian influence is particularly obvious in Kristeva’s theoretical meditations on melancholia and depression in the work *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (*Soleil Noir: Dépression et mélancolie*, 1987). In particular, the Kleinian understanding of mourning, reparation, the place of melancholia in the psychological genesis of the subject and the figure of the mother in the psychological dynamics of melancholia hugely inform Kristeva’s theorization of the condition. Thus, the place of Kristeva’s work on melancholia in the present study is as an extension of the comparative theoretical perspective on Zoshchenko’s melancholia that was started by the preceding discussion of Melanie Klein. The particular importance of Kristeva in

¹⁰² Ibid, p. 133.

¹⁰³ In addition to Klein, these biographical subjects included the philosopher Hannah Arendt and the writer Collette.

this respect is the fact that, in line with the Lacanian marriage of psychoanalysis and linguistics, she is able to translate the psychological dynamics of melancholia into concrete textual terms. In view of the current study's ambition to read the textual contours of melancholia in Zoshchenko's literary oeuvre, Kristeva's work on melancholia acquires a special relevance.

For Kristeva, melancholia is a phenomenon negatively, but deeply, inscribed in language; it is primarily "a noncommunicable grief", one which causes the sufferer to "lose all interest in words, actions and even life itself."¹⁰⁴ Time and again she draws attention to the contours of melancholic speech:

Let us keep in mind the speech of the depressed – repetitive and monotonous. Faced with the impossibility of concatenating, they utter sentences that are interrupted, exhausted, come to a standstill. Even phrases they cannot formulate. A repetitive rhythm, a monotonous melody emerge and dominate the broken logical sequences, changing them into recurring, obsessive litanies. Finally, when that frugal musicality becomes exhausted in its turn, or simply does not succeed in becoming established on account of the pressure of silence, the melancholy person appears to stop cognizing as well as uttering, sinking into the blankness of asymbolia or the excess of an unorderable cognitive chaos.¹⁰⁵

For Kristeva, melancholic speech is devitalized at a fundamental level. Language loses its grip on the melancholic subject who ceases to either believe in it or identify with it; speech is deprived of its capacity for "making sense for the subject".¹⁰⁶ This linguistic lifelessness is less obvious in the denotative aspects of signification than in the material, rhythmic and pulsional components of language; it tells in interruption, logical inconsistency, absence and finally silence. In many ways Kristevan

¹⁰⁴ *Black Sun*, p.3.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, p.33. Depressive speech is similarly evoked a few pages later (p.43) and the chapter entitled 'Life and Death of Speech' is substantially devoted to understanding the linguistic modalities of melancholia.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, p.52.

melancholia manifests itself as a profound subjective failure in language, ultimately even a death in language.

The origins of this subjective failure in language lie, Kristeva suggests, at the point at which the subject attains linguistic competence, in a particular and foundational moment of mourning. It will be recalled that Klein developed the concept of mourning beyond Freud's mechanistic understanding, turning it into an open-ended process for the integration of psychic and external realities, lying at the heart of all ego development. Kristeva in turn borrows much from this broader, less mechanistic Kleinian notion of mourning, but she also changes it in significant ways. Firstly, while acknowledging the existence of objectival depression in the Kleinian mould, she posits the simultaneous existence of a more "precocious", narcissistic, pre-objectival mourning that has no parallel in Klein.¹⁰⁷ Secondly, she infuses the process of mourning with a particular linguistic significance that is absent in both Klein and Freud. In fact, for Kristeva, the successful completion of a particular type of mourning becomes the *sine qua non* condition of entry into the realm of language and symbol. Thus, she suggests that "the possibility of concatenating signifiers (words or actions) appears to depend upon going through mourning for an archaic and indispensable object", a protracted and painful "[m]ourning for the Thing".¹⁰⁸

The Thing, for Kristeva, is "the real that does not lend itself to signification, the centre of attraction and repulsion, seat of the sexuality from which the object of desire will become separated."¹⁰⁹ Disinterred from the abstruse Lacanian terminology, what this passage really suggests is that the Thing has strong affinities with what Lacan terms the Real: that totality of psychic meaning which, being irreducible to symbolic language, must ultimately remain meaningless in its totality, but which must

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, pp. 11-12.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p.40.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p.13.

also appear as the alluring end of language, powering the desire that, in the last count, anchors the subject in the realm of signs and signification. For Kristeva, it is the failure to adequately locate desire in the metonymic satisfactions of language which accounts for that melancholic withdrawal from the wider symbolic order noted earlier. In Kristeva's account of the birth of the speaking subject, the discovery of the seat of desire in language demands the rejection of the pre-linguistic, mother-child symbiosis: "Matricide is our vital necessity, the sine-qua-non condition of our individuation".¹¹⁰ In order to find the mother in language (literally, to find the word 'mother'), the child has to accept, or more precisely to mourn the loss of a more profoundly felt pre-linguistic, maternal immanence. This translates child language acquisition into something of a necessary, but traumatic separation: the "intrepid wanderer", by necessity "leaves the crib to meet the mother in the realm of representations"; but without agreeing "to lose mother", he can "neither imagine nor name her."¹¹¹ It is precisely the failure to mourn the loss of this pre-objectival, pre-symbolic maternal immanence in exchange for entry into the infinite metonymy of desire afforded by Being in language that results in the melancholic withdrawal from a pallid symbolic realm: the melancholic simply cannot accept the symbolic gratifications of language in exchange for the wordless certainties of biological immanence with the mother.

The biological basis of this pre-symbolic space is important to note because it accounts for the pallor and de-vitalization that Kristeva sees as characteristic of melancholic speech. To understand how this is so, one needs to turn to Kristeva's earlier exposition of the birth of the speaking subject contained in her *Revolution in Poetic Language* (*La révolution du langage poétique*, 1974). In this work she

¹¹⁰ Ibid, pp. 27-28.

¹¹¹ Ibid, p.41.

suggested that the entry into the realm of language and symbol was preceded by, and predicated upon, a pre-symbolic infantile space of need prior to desire: a “nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated.”¹¹² This psychic space, based in the material of unconscious Freudian drive economy, she terms the semiotic *chora*. The protracted entry of the subject into the realm of symbol and language is marked by the gradual and partial ordering of these drives into symbolic cathexes in line with the demands and grammar of symbolic discourse; thus they are not overcome by entry into the symbolic realm but are rather entwined into language, anchoring the psychological subject into the socio-linguistic system that Lacan termed the Other.¹¹³ In this way, the biological self is effectively inscribed into language and discourse. In the case of melancholic withdrawal, it is precisely these biological bindings of the embodied self into discourse that begin to loosen, literally detaching the flesh and blood self from the cold expanses of a now distant symbolic realm.¹¹⁴ It is for this reason that melancholic speech becomes bloodless, “like an alien skin”; this is why “melancholy persons are foreigners in their maternal tongue.”¹¹⁵

However, the melancholic satisfactions promised by this withdrawal into wordless communion with “the Thing” are essentially chimerical: “That total and unsignifiable Thing is insignificant – it is a mere Nothing, their Nothing, Death.”¹¹⁶ Thus, the only real escape for the melancholic is the psychic re-inscription of their semiotic selves into the symbolic realm. Kristeva finds the models for such re-inscription in various aspects of art and religious practice, but particularly in writing:

¹¹² J Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. M Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 25.

¹¹³ Ibid, pp. 43-51.

¹¹⁴ J Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p.46.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, p.53.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, p.51.

[A]esthetic and particularly literary creation, and also religious discourse in its imaginary, fictional essence, set forth a device whose prosodic economy, interaction with characters, and implicit symbolism constitute a very faithful semiological representation of the subject's battle with symbolic collapse.¹¹⁷

For Kristeva, this "literary representation", constituting a mimetic staging of the symbolic abdication at the heart of the melancholic condition, functions as a sort of "catharsis"; as such "it is a therapeutic device used in all societies throughout the ages."¹¹⁸

Perhaps understandably for a professional psychoanalyst, Kristeva seeks to place some limits on the therapeutic potential of art, religion and literature. She argues that they fall short of what she calls "elaboration": "the sense of becoming aware of the inter- and intra-psychic causes of moral suffering."¹¹⁹ This concentration on "strengthening the subject's cognitive possibilities" is what Kristeva believes sets the psychoanalytic approach apart from artistic engagements with melancholia.¹²⁰ She characterizes this elaborative step as an attempt to "endow discourse with a modifying power over the fluctuations of primary processes and even bioenergetic transmissions, by favouring a better integration of semiotic agitation within the symbolic fabric."¹²¹ Yet, this neat distinction between the therapeutic effectiveness of psychoanalysis and literature, while undoubtedly illustrative of a broad tendency, is ultimately unpersuasive in the totality of its claim. Kristeva definitely overstates the exclusivity of the elaborative gesture to psychoanalysis or linked psychotherapeutic discourses. In fact, her distinction is only maintainable on the basis of upholding a particular, culturally-ingrained way of conceiving literature that is not necessarily applicable in

¹¹⁷ Ibid, p.24.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, p.24.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, p.24.

¹²⁰ Ibid, p.24.

¹²¹ Ibid, p.66.

all literary contexts. Indeed, it shall be argued in the last two chapters of this study that in the Soviet context, where psychotherapeutic discourses were extremely limited, and where literature historically assumed a more generalized civic function, Soviet literature was not only able to assume this elaborative function, but, in the form of Zoshchenko's explicitly therapeutic works, it actually began to do precisely that.

Kristeva herself seems to imply that literature can aspire to more than just catharsis. In a later discussion of artistic sublimations she links literature with the self-reinvention of the melancholic sufferer:

[T]he work of art that insures the rebirth of its author and its reader or viewer is one that succeeds in integrating the artificial language it puts forward (new style, new composition, surprising imagination) and the unnamed agitations of an omnipotent self that ordinary social and linguistic usage always leave somewhat orphaned or plunged into mourning. Hence such a fiction, if it isn't an antidepressant, is at least a survival, a resurrection.¹²²

This is already a long way from catharsis. Moreover in the mutual implication of artist and reader it would seem already to be gesturing towards a more transferential space in literature. This is important to note, for, as shall be argued later in this study, this sense of fiction as self reinvention is precisely what comes to characterize Zoshchenko's later textual engagement with his own melancholia. In fact, with its reference to formal and stylistic innovation and rebirth of both reader and writer, this passage could almost stand as an epigraph to that attempt. The reference to survival is particularly arresting: in a later section where she describes some of her case histories, one of Kristeva's patients describes her attempts to escape melancholia as a "poetics of survival";¹²³ as this study shall argue, Zoshchenko's attempts to write the truth of his own melancholia might well be described in the same way.

¹²² Ibid, p.51.

¹²³ Ibid, p.73.

Kristeva's distinction between literary and psychoanalytic therapies is eroded even further by her urging of clinicians to "enrich their practice by paying greater attention to these sublimatory [artistic] solutions to our crises, in order to be lucid counterdepressants rather than neutralizing antidepressants."¹²⁴ Among these therapeutic solutions for re-inscribing the semiotic self back into language she particularly focuses on three: "prosody", "polysemy" and "the psychic organization of forgiveness". In prosody she finds a "language beyond language" capable of inscribing "the rhythm and alliterations of semiotic processes" into language. By "polysemy" she means the way in which literature "unsettles naming and, by building up a plurality of connotations around the sign" reveals "the non-meaning, or the true meaning, of the Thing." With "the psychic organization of forgiveness" she emphasizes, in Kleinian fashion, art's potential for reinforcing a "kindly ideal, capable of removing the guilt" that characterizes the melancholic condition.¹²⁵ The example of this *par excellence*, must surely be the infinite mercy and redeeming grace found in Dostoevsky's ethic of Christian sacrifice.

Returning to the passage from 'Lilacs are Blooming' that opened this chapter, the melancholic subtext of that "pallor of words" and "uncertainty of thoughts" should seem a great deal clearer. However that still leaves that baffling impenetrability of the "virgin jungle" of Russian literature. While the melancholic alienation from language in general is now clear, what of the specific alienation from the great canon of Russian literature? A clue perhaps lies in Kristeva's understanding of intertextuality. While she no doubt subsumes it into her rather expansive notion of "polysemy", it might be argued that intertextuality deserves special mention in this regard. Kristeva in fact coined the term 'intertextuality', but in response to a perceived flattening of its

¹²⁴ Ibid, pp. 24-25.

¹²⁵ Ibid, p.97.

critical specificity which followed the term's widespread adoption in critical circles she later re-branded her term "transposition".¹²⁶ This she defines as "the passage from one sign system to another", with the most important aspect of this process being the fact it "demands a new articulation [...] of enuciative and denotative positionality": in other words it demands a new articulation of the subjective position of the speaker.¹²⁷ The particular importance of this is that Kristeva also uses the term "transposition" to refer to that foundational act of mourning which, by "transposing" the loss of semiotic immanence into linguistic desire, underpins the subject's entry into the symbolic realm.¹²⁸ This foundational transposition then enables that infinite chain of transpositions within the symbolic realm that might perhaps be better understood in terms of Kristeva's original 'intertextuality'. In view of this, there is surely a particularly melancholic resonance to the deliberate enactment of this intertextual gesture in melancholic literature. It re-enacts in text a more primal failure to embed oneself in the otherness of language; nothing makes that fundamental otherness more explicit than deliberately invoking the words of others. This is frequently the effect of Zoshchenko's complex, and at times contorted, intertextual invocations which often twist the canon of Russian literature to yield profoundly melancholic subtexts. As shall be seen below, while it is not always immediately obvious, Russian literature does have a long and varied history of literary melancholia.

Melancholia in Russian Literature and Culture

The word melancholia itself occurs fairly infrequently outside writing of the Sentimental era, but when it is conceived, as above, to be mental pain arising in the imperfect compatibility of self and world, then melancholia is revealed as something

¹²⁶ J Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, pp. 59-60.

¹²⁷ Ibid, p. 60.

¹²⁸ J Kristeva, *Black Sun*, pp. 40-42.

of a perennial concern of Russian literature and a commensurately vast theme. It will be necessary, in order to illuminate Zoshchenko's specific melancholic reading of Russian literature later in this study, to conceive of melancholia in this broader, conceptual sense; however, by necessity, the following discussion will have to be brief and highly selective. While still striving to adumbrate the general contours of the melancholy theme in Russian literature, its primary emphasis will have to fall on highlighting the melancholic references that find later intertextual reflection in Zoshchenko's own work. This will invariably result in an outline that is more suggestive than systematic, and will have to leave many frustrating lacunae to await future elucidation by an appropriately rigorous study of this theme on its own terms.

If 'melancholia' was an eighteenth-century import from Europe, then it is perhaps unsurprising that the word itself is most deeply embedded in the literature and culture of that century, in particular in the age of Catherine II. Vinitsky shows how during Catherine's reign melancholia quickly became the politicized obverse of the self-styled cheerful rationality of the empress' enlightened despotism; in her own satires Catherine appropriated the word 'melancholia' to deride critics of her regime and associate them with the paranoia, cruelty and madness of her predecessor on the throne.¹²⁹ However, as her reign progressed and opposition steadily grew, especially among the secular gentry that she herself had freed from state obligations, her charges of melancholia were "eagerly accepted and reinterpreted by Catherine's defiant opponents" such as Nikolai Novikov and Aleksandr Radishchev.¹³⁰ It was a short step for these now self-consciously melancholic critics of Romanov absolutism to fashion something of a cult of melancholia, "a philosophy of sadness": "indeed, melancholy was chosen by Russian moral and social thinkers as a spiritual banner for

¹²⁹ I Vinitsky, 'A Cheerful Empress and her Gloomy Critics', pp. 32-39.

¹³⁰ Ibid, p.40.

the new 'philosophy of faith and feeling' they propagated."¹³¹ Thus, by painting her critics with melancholy hues, Vinitsky notes, "the empress shaped the image of the Russian *intelligent* in her writings long before this image appeared in Russian literature."¹³² Fuelled by verse translations of the English sepulchral melancholy of Edward Young and Thomas Gray (by the mystical melancholic Aleksei Kutuzov and the equally atrabilious Vasilii Zhukovskii respectively), melancholia became the mark of intellectual reflection, moral seriousness and a rejection of worldly vanities.¹³³ This sense of the intellectual sweetness and moral profundity of melancholy reflection persisted beyond the Catherinian era and into the nineteenth century where it became embedded in that pastoral world of gentry sentimentalism which proved to be such a fertile seed bed for much sentimental and romantic literature, and the elegy of which was so mournfully sung by Ivan Turgenev.¹³⁴

This sentimental notion of the sweetness of melancholy is detectable in several works from this period. In Nikolai Karamzin's poem 'Melancholia: an Imitation of Delille' ('Melankholiia: Podrazhanie Deliliu', 1800) for instance, the melancholic humour is described as: "The happiness of the unhappy and the sweetness of the distressed!| O Melancholia! To them you are dearer than all the other| Artificial amusements and vapid pleasures."¹³⁵ A similar humour also pervades the self-indulgent sadness of love departed in Pushkin's poem 'Melancholy' ('Unynie', 1816).¹³⁶ However, as Vinitsky notes, the melancholic poet *par excellence* of this period was Vasilii Zhukovskii, who boasted the strongest contemporary reputation as

¹³¹ Ibid, p.40.

¹³² Ibid, p.37.

¹³³ Ibid, p.41.

¹³⁴ A B Wachtel and I Vinitsky, *Russian Literature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), pp. 61-63.

¹³⁵ «Несчастных счастье и сладость огорченных!| О Меланхолия! ты им милее всех| Искусственных забав и ветреных утех.» N Karamzin, 'Melankholiia: Podrazhanie Deliliu' in *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvorenii* (Moscow-Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1966), p.260.

¹³⁶ A S Pushkin, 'Unynie' in *Sobranie sochinenii v vos'mi tomakh* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1967-1970), vol. 1, p. 211.

a “singer of melancholy” (“*pevets melankholii*”) and a purveyor of “a philosophy of sadness” (“*filososiia grusti*”).¹³⁷ Much of his melancholic writing took the form of verse translations of European melancholic poems, such as Gray’s elegy noted earlier, however, his technique of poetic translation always remained loose enough to allow the finished works to be infused with his own sense of philosophical sadness.¹³⁸ Indeed, Vinitsky notes that in his verse translation of Milton’s ‘L’Allegro’ in 1833 one can see a new note of bitterness which can be connected to the poet’s own contemporaneous “struggle with black melancholia” (“*bor’ba s chernoi melankholiei*”).¹³⁹

In fact, what Zhukovskii reveals is really a fundamental duality that characterized the literary treatment of melancholia throughout the sentimental and romantic eras: on the one hand it could be the enchanting sadness of the thoughtful man; on the other hand it could very quickly become the pathological gloominess of clinically depressed.¹⁴⁰ This same duality is equally observable across the writings of other poets of the era. As noted earlier, Pushkin could indulge in dreamy sadness for his poem ‘Melancholy’; however, he could equally stage the darker aspects of the humour. For instance, a blacker note of melancholic alienation attaches to the mortal body of the poet in Pushkin’s famous poem ‘The Prophet’ (‘Prorok’, 1826). Thus, before being transfigured by a divinely ordained poetic calling, the poet is laid in bodily prostration: “Tormented by a spiritual thirst| Through a gloomy desert I dragged my way”.¹⁴¹ Later the note repeats: “Like a corpse in the desert I lay”.¹⁴² The

¹³⁷ I Vinitskii, *Utekhi melankholii* in O A Lekmanov (ed), *Uchenye zapiski moskovskogo kul'turologicheskogo litseia No. 1310* (Moscow: Izdanie moskovskogo kul'turologicheskogo litseia, 1997), p. 109.

¹³⁸ Ibid, p. 128.

¹³⁹ Ibid, pp. 128-132.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, p.108.

¹⁴¹ «Духовной жаждою томим, В пустыне мрачной я влачился [...]» A S Pushkin, ‘Prorok’ in *Sobranie sochinenii v vos'mi tomakh* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1967-1970), vol. 2, p. 364.

poetic contrast between the poet's deathly flesh and a transfiguring word violently thrust deep within his chest by a divine other has a powerful melancholic inflection in terms of the understanding of the condition adumbrated above. The melancholia inhering in this image is surely further confirmed by the fact that, as Zholkovsky observes, Zoshchenko drew on it to describe his own melancholic prostration on the eve of his purported cure in *Before Sunrise*.¹⁴³

A comparable sense of melancholy attaching to distance from the poetic voice is detectable in Pushkin's early narrative poem 'Ruslan and Ludmila' ('Ruslan i Ludmila', 1817-1820); or rather, it is detectable in the later addition of an epilogue, written in 1820, but not appended to the poem until the second edition of 1828. The original published poem was in fact something of a demonstration piece for a precocious poetic talent eager to make his name. It is infused with a youthful optimism that tells in the lightness and ironic inflection of the narrative voice which largely cushions the reader from the darker aspects of the folktale on which it is based. However, the epilogue, written in exile, is of an altogether different nature: looking back on a poetic self now seemingly distant in time, it voices both a melancholic yearning for an absent muse, and an equally melancholic despair for the blinkered naivety of youth. The more chastened voice of the epilogue looks back on the naïve, youthful versifier of the preceding poem and opines:

I sang, all the while forgetting
The hurts of blind fortune and foes,
Deceit by a vapid Dorida,
And the noisy tattle of fools.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² «Как труп в пустыне я лежал»; Ibid, p. 365.

¹⁴³ A K Zholkovskii, *Poetika nedoveriia*, p. 236. See also *Pered voskhodom solntsa*, 3:626.

¹⁴⁴ «Я пел – и забывал обиды | Слепого счастья и врагов, | Измены ветреной Дориды | И сплетни шумные глупцов.» A S Pushkin, 'Ruslan i Ludmila' in *Poemy* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1964), p. 100.

While clearly inflected by the bitterness of political exile, this passage combines amorous, societal and political inconstancy in a peculiarly melancholic unity. Moreover, because Russian uses the word '*schast'e*' to mean both happiness and good fortune, those "hurts of blind fortune" can equally be read as "hurts of blind happiness": the first evokes an indifferent fate; the second is a more melancholic intimation of the delusions of joy. This melancholic chord continues to play as the poet mourns his absconding lyric against the backdrop of the rugged landscape of his southern exile:

I'm nourished by feelings unvoiced,
The wonder and charm of landscapes
Untamed and gloomy, still unwrought;
My soul is, each hour, as before
Filled up with the tedium of thought -
But poetry's flame is no more.¹⁴⁵

As in 'The Prophet', there is a melancholy residing in the extinguishing of poetic voice which tells particularly in those "feelings unvoiced", in a soul full of "the tedium of thought" and in a nature "untamed and gloomy". However, more interesting still from the point of view of this study is a melancholy that takes shape in an act of authorial self-reading. As will become evident later in this study, Zoshchenko's textual melancholia acquires much of its shape and voice through comparable acts of self-reading across time.

Although the word 'melancholia' occurs less frequently outside of the Sentimental era, this same dualistic, melancholic theme thrived in the literature of the so-called 'Golden Age'. The later nostalgic adoration of the age notwithstanding, Vinitsky suggests that "contemporaries themselves not infrequently called the happy

¹⁴⁵ «Питаюсь чувствами немymi | И чудной прелестью картин | Природы дикой и угрюмой; | Душа, как прежде, каждый час | Полна томительною думой - | Но огонь поэзии погас.» Ibid, pp. 100-101.

(as it seems to us now) Golden Age *the age of melancholia*.”¹⁴⁶ For instance, there is frequently a profound melancholic alienation in the romantic theme of the ‘superfluous man’ (*lishnii chelovek*) of Russian literature: the educated man whose moral seriousness and European values alienate him equally from state service and the common people. Thus, it is no coincidence that Evgenii Onegin, the hero of Pushkin’s verse novel of that name (1823-1831), is no stranger to melancholic suffering:

An illness, the search for whose reason
Already should long have been made,
So much like the spleen of the English,
Sadness of a more Russian shade
Took hold of him little by little;
God be thanked, that he never did once
Try to put his gun to his head
But grew instead as cold to life as the dead.¹⁴⁷

A more morbidly melancholic treatment of the ‘superfluous man’ theme is perhaps found in the character of Pechorin from Lermontov’s novel *Hero of Our Time* (*Geroi nashego vremeni*, 1840). Pechorin finds himself trapped within the confines of his own self-conscious romanticism and chafes against a romantic psychology that ironically restricts his own self-realisation. This sense of a self curtailed within a symbolic other not of one’s making adds a melancholic note to accompany the exotic tragedy that the novel stages.

Again, while the word itself is seldom, if ever, used, there remains a substantial melancholic aspect to that other standard of nineteenth-century literature: the theme of the ‘little man’ (*malen'kii chelovek*). This is especially apparent in the work of Gogol, the writer who made this theme his own in the first half of the

¹⁴⁶ «Счастливым (как это кажется нам сейчас) Золотой век сами современники нередко называли *веком меланхолии*.» I Vinitskii, *Utekhi melankholii*, p.108 (italics in original).

¹⁴⁷ «Недуг, которого причину| Давно бы отыскать пора,| Подобный английскому *сплину*,| Короче: русская *хандра*| Им овладела понемногу;| Он застрелиться, слава богу,| Попробовать не захотел,| Но к жизни вовсе охладел.» A S Pushkin, *Evgenii Onegin* (Moscow: Detskaia literatura, 1964), p. 70 (1:XXXVIII).

nineteenth-century. The 'little man', typically a low-ranking member of the Imperial civil service, struggles tragically to withstand the indifferent demands and harsh rebuffs of a social order distant and unmoved by his fate. This struggle for identity, recognition and the pursuit of individual desire within a recalcitrant social Other has a melancholic relevance that is obvious in the light of the theoretical discussions above. What is interesting is the way in which Gogol articulates this melancholy in terms of his own particular comic aesthetic; he famously described this technique in his novel *Dead Souls* (*Mertvye dushi*, 1842) as a means "to survey the whole vastness of life as it's carried along, to survey it through laughter visible to the world, and through hidden tears unknown to it."¹⁴⁸ This comic aesthetic, marked by a surface laughter which is tempered by a submerged melancholy, is a feature of a great deal of Russian comic writing; as shall be suggested in the next chapter it is also a tradition that Zoshchenko deployed, punctuating his laughter with telling melancholic absences and occlusions.

What is interesting about Gogol's melancholic comedy is that he articulates it alongside a vision of profound authorial isolation. Suggesting that his authorial vision jars with popular literary expectations and astutely predicting the misunderstanding of his work, he suggests, in the same third person autobiographical interlude in *Dead Souls*, that his authorial path will be arduous: "Harsh is his profession, and bitterly he will he feel his solitude."¹⁴⁹ The implication that the melancholy underlying the laughter in his technique is at least partially his own 'bitter solitude' felt amidst the widespread misapprehension of his artistic vision by his contemporaries finds definite parallels in Gogol's life. Throughout the 1840s Gogol was increasingly absorbed by a

¹⁴⁸ «[...] озирать всю громадно-несущуюся жизнь, озирать ее сквозь видный миру смех и незримый, неведомые ему слезы». N V Gogol', *Mertvye dushi* in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v odnom tome* (Moscow: Alfa-Kniga, 2009), p. 580.

¹⁴⁹ «Сурово его поприще, и горько почувствует он свое одиночество.» Ibid, p.579.

search for the spiritual “perfection” which he believed would translate into a purity of authorial word that would resist the dilution of his prophetic vision by the misapprehension of the reading public and the critical establishment.¹⁵⁰ This unwillingness to accept the way in which words, being fundamentally other, casually shake off authorial intentions betrays an intensely melancholic alienation from the profound otherness of the symbolic realm.

This phenomenon is actually treated fictionally, with a degree of knowing irony largely absent from the later Gogol, in the course of his most famous tale of a lowly clerk: ‘The Overcoat’ (‘Shinel’’, 1842). The hero of this tale, Akakii Akakievich, is pointedly made a diligent copy-clerk who finds in the exact replication of written matter “some kind of varied and pleasant world of his own.”¹⁵¹ That this is a confusion of self and other is confirmed by his tendency to see in everything his own handwriting and to frequently not notice whether “he is in the middle of a line, or rather in the middle of the street.”¹⁵² In this he is contrasted with the tailor he employs to make his new overcoat: Petrovich delights in the “gulf that separates tailors who only put in linings and make repairs from those who stitch from scratch.”¹⁵³ Thus Petrovich’s creativity is posited in opposition to Akakievich’s solemn transcription. Importantly, while the inflexibility of Akakievich’s transcriptive personality cannot accept the loss of the coat and even chooses death in its place, Petrovich is able to watch with satisfaction as the coat he has made walks off down the street.¹⁵⁴ If this opposition between an inflexible transcription of self into the Other and a willingness

¹⁵⁰ R Maguire, ‘Introduction’ in *Gogol from the Twentieth-Century: Eleven Essays* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 27-28.

¹⁵¹ «[...] какой-то свой разнообразный и приятный мир.» N V Gogol, ‘Shinel’ in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v odnom tome* (Moscow: Alfa-Kniga, 2009), p.349.

¹⁵² «[...] на середине строки, а скорее на середине улицы.» Ibid, p.350.

¹⁵³ [...] бездну, разделяющую портных, которые подставляют только подкладки и переправляют, от тех, которые шьют заново.» Ibid, p.356.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, p.356.

to accept that created objects acquire a life of their own is translated into creativity in language (as the copy-clerk theme surely invites one to do) then one is left with a playful meditation on precisely the same dilemma that Gogol faced in his writing career. As shall become clear in chapter three, the melancholic theory of authorship staged in this subplot of 'The Overcoat' will assume a great importance in Zoshchenko's comic fiction of the 1920s.

Dostoevsky's literary career started as an outgrowth of this same Gogolian fascination with the 'little man', but it was brutally interrupted by his detention and exile on charges of political subversion. It is primarily in the works that grow out of his Siberian exile that the melancholy theme resounds most clearly. In fact, describing the writer's account of Siberian exile contained in *Notes from the House of the Dead* (*Zapiski iz mertvogo doma*, 1861), Dostoevsky's biographer Joseph Frank notes "the melancholy conclusions" that followed this reflection on his past.¹⁵⁵ Kristeva devotes a chapter of her meditation on melancholia to Dostoevsky, where she concentrates on reading her conception of a melancholic poetics of forgiveness in his post-Siberian oeuvre.¹⁵⁶ However, in adopting this focus she perhaps misses another important aspect of the melancholic theme, one that was certainly more important in Zoshchenko's invocation of Dostoevsky's melancholia in *Before Sunrise*: that of the underground man. This exercise in alienated selfhood combines ego, desire, guilt, shame, pride and illness to illustrate the perverting effects of a mind unable to locate itself in the social Other; in this regard, the private torments of the nameless clerk at the centre of the story represent the extremity of the 'little man' theme. As Richard Peace notes, the retreat of the hero further and further into his own perverted rationality is a reflection of a greater human tendency to live in the abstract, at a

¹⁵⁵ J Frank, *Dostoevsky: A Writer in His Time* (Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 203.

¹⁵⁶ J Kristeva, *Black Sun*, pp. 173-217.

distance from the realities of embodied existence.¹⁵⁷ This desperate plea for the need to live creatively in the symbolic realm is reflected in the underground man's paradoxical melancholic references to "the living life" ("zhivaia zhizn") and "those born dead" ("mertvo-rozhdennye").¹⁵⁸

Taken together, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1877) and *A Confession* (*Ispoved'*, 1882) are similarly amenable to interpretation in terms of the melancholic theme established above. As Andrew Wachtel argues, the fact the two works are interconnected is established by Tolstoy's unostentatious self-citation from the earlier novel in *A Confession*; Wachtel thus convincingly argues that the two works invite reading in tandem.¹⁵⁹ *A Confession* relates the details of Tolstoy's spiritual crisis and resultant mental breakdown with autobiographical clarity. Although he does not explicitly conceive of his crisis in terms of melancholia, the relevance of the term to Tolstoy's mental prostration and suicidal urges is confirmed by the fact that the psychologist and pragmatist philosopher William James used precisely this term to characterize the breakdown Tolstoy describes.¹⁶⁰ If one accepts, as James does, that Tolstoy's spiritual crisis as described in *A Confession* can be understood in terms of melancholia, then one of the effects of reading it in parallel with *Anna Karenina*, as Wachtel suggests, is surely to bring out the melancholia in this latter work as well. Indeed, the sadness is not hard to find; it forms half of one of the most famous opening lines in world literature: "All happy families resemble one another; each

¹⁵⁷ R Peace, *Dostoevsky's "Notes from Underground"* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1993), pp. 64-65.

¹⁵⁸ F M Dostoevskii, *Zapiski iz podpol'ia* in *Sobranie sochinenii v desiati tomakh* (Moscow: Khudozhestvannaia literatura, 1956-58), vol. 4, pp. 243-244.

¹⁵⁹ A Wachtel, 'History and Autobiography in Tolstoy' in D T Orwin (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Tolstoy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp.182-185.

¹⁶⁰ W James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London: Routledge, 2008 [1902]), pp. 108-114.

unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”¹⁶¹ Reading in this way, one is suddenly struck by the number of mental and spiritual crises one encounters in *Anna Karenina*. In fact, most of the major characters go through some form of black mood in the course of the novel; the causes are all different (infidelity, death of a relative, rejection of courtship, financial crisis, sense of social superfluity) and they are all ultimately overcome by re-inscribing individual desire into social realities (marriage, child-bearing, social activism, military adventure). All that is except one: Anna Karenina herself, who caught between two socially irreconcilable desires (marriage to Vronskii and custody of her son), is unable to anchor her desire in social reality and thus finds nothing between her and madness, and eventually death. In *A Confession*, Tolstoy finds that society and social activity only offer a delusory and unsatisfactory basis for subjective happiness, which would mean that, if the parallel reading is to be upheld, the happiness of all the surviving characters in *Anna Karenina* is likewise insubstantial. In the end, Tolstoy finds nothing holding him back from madness and death except religious faith. While Tolstoy’s faith is conceived of as a religion, in more general terms it might be argued that it is a broader act of faith that keeps the subject anchored in the symbolic realm and a failure of this faith that plunges the subject into melancholia.¹⁶²

The melancholy in Chekhov is of a different nature entirely to Tolstoy’s. It is intimately connected with his early career as a medical practitioner and a part-time writer of comic fiction and *feuilletons*. As Vera Gottlieb makes clear, Chekhov’s comedy always remained based in his conviction that laughter was more often than

¹⁶¹ «Все счастливые семьи похожи друг на друга, каждая несчастливaя семья несчастлива по-своему.» L. N. Tolstoi, *Anna Karenina* in *Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrnadtsati tomakh* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1951-53), vol. 8, p. 5.

¹⁶² See J. Kristeva, *Black Sun*, pp. 13-14.

not the best medicine.¹⁶³ Yet, like Gogol before him, there always remained a melancholic element to his curative laughter, something evident in one of the early pseudonyms he used when writing for the comic press: ‘The Man without a Spleen’ (*‘Chelovek bez selebenki’*).¹⁶⁴ It will be recalled that according to humoristic medicine the spleen was the organ responsible for controlling the preponderance of black bile, which would make Chekhov’s comic mask particularly melancholic. This ironic reference to melancholia perhaps reveals a more general preference for irony when approaching black moods and pathological sadness: Masha in Chekhov’s play *Three Sisters* (*Tri sestry*, 1900), a character always perched on the edge of hysterical sadness, insists in Act One that “Today I’m ‘melancholic’, I don’t feel very cheerful, don’t listen to me”; this is accompanied by the stage direction “laughing through tears”.¹⁶⁵ The Gogolian stage direction and the comically knowing mispronunciation of melancholia suffuse the whole concept with irony. The reason for this is perhaps that melancholia is the very real suffering that lies beyond the various vain attempts of Chekhovian characters to search for some definitive epistemological certainty in life. For Vladimir Kataev, this doomed but vital search for a personal epistemology adequate to life underlies all Chekhov’s works from the comic fiction to the longer tales and finally to the plays.¹⁶⁶ The depressive torpor that results when this search is abandoned is most obviously demonstrated in *Ivanov* (1887), perhaps Chekhov’s bleakest work. The eponymous hero is a kind of Levin (from *Anna Karenina*) turned sour: a landowner whose idealism has evaporated and whose marriage for love has turned into bitter resentment; he has given up on rational

¹⁶³ V Gottlieb, ‘Chekhov’s Comedy’ in V Gottlieb and P Allain (eds) *The Cambridge Companion to Chekhov* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 228-238.

¹⁶⁴ R Bartlett, *Chekhov: Scenes from a Life* (London: The Free Press, 2004), pp. 133-134.

¹⁶⁵ «Сегодня я в мерзехлондии, невесело мне, и ты не слушай меня. (Смеюсь сквозь слезы.)» А Р Chekhov, *Tri sestry*. Act 1. Masha makes this statement in her first speech in the play.

¹⁶⁶ V B Kataev, *If Only We Could Know! An Interpretation of Chekhov*, trans. H Pitcher (Chicago: Ivan Dee, 2002), *passim*.

farming methods and has surrendered himself to an all-engulfing pessimism. Yet it is less his melancholic pessimism *per se* which fascinates, rather it is the effect of it on others that matters, or rather it is the way it undermines all the other characters' attempts to make sense of him. Bradley Lewis, who approaches the play from a psychiatric perspective, has noted precisely the way in which Ivanov enacts the varied attempts of other characters to reach narrative conclusions about Ivanov's melancholic prostration and uses this to articulate a broader narrative paradigm of treatment for clinical depression.¹⁶⁷ Ivanov's melancholic torpor thus becomes existence beyond knowing, existence in the absence of the flawed but necessary ideals which keep humanity orientated towards life. That this position is unsustainable is demonstrated by Ivanov's suicide at the end.

By the end of the nineteenth-century, Russian literature witnessed a spectacular re-birth of the romantic outlook in the form of the so-called Silver Age of Russian literature. Amongst its varied pantheon of predecessors, writers of the era consciously looked back to earlier romantic forebears such as Tiutchev and, as Vinitsky shows, Zhukovskii.¹⁶⁸ The recalling of the melancholic poet *par excellence* was particularly apposite, for the melancholia of the Silver Age was in many ways the equal of that of the earlier Golden Age. Reacting against the positivism and scientism of the last decades of the nineteenth century, Silver Age literature, especially in its Symbolist incarnation, consciously rejected the rationalism of previous generations and their belief in progress:

The categorical demand for the impossible, the readiness to exchange sanity for joy, the conviction that the cause of our sorrow

¹⁶⁷ B Lewis, 'Listening to Chekhov: Narrative Approaches to Depression', *The Bulletin of the North American Chekhov Society*, XV:1 (Fall 2007), pp. 7-25.

¹⁶⁸ I Vinitskii, *Utekhi melankholii*, p.109.

is beyond understanding – all these are the sentiments of a generation in revolt against causality and common sense.¹⁶⁹

In its place, Symbolists looked to metaphysical verities beyond the bounds of the everyday world of sensation; they found poetic themes in the “pleasures of death” and “the superior wisdom of despair”.¹⁷⁰

Symbolist writing thus aimed to move beyond the bounds of formal language; as Avril Pyman shows, the Symbolists borrowed a line from Tiutchev which they elevated into a “slogan” for their poetic tendency: “The thought once spoken is a lie” (“*Mysl' izrechennaia est' lozh'*”).¹⁷¹ Symbolism was “a poetry of suggestion” which deployed “symbols”, “correspondences” and “associative thinking” which aimed primarily at the creation of “mood”.¹⁷² Its adherents “sought not so much to illustrate a thought as to communicate a succession of moods unified by the sentient subject.”¹⁷³ It was thus dependent on an extreme artistic subjectivity in which the artist becomes “the whole and only source of his own creativity.”¹⁷⁴

The melancholic resonance of this turning inward towards the extra-linguistic creativity of the self is quite clear. The associative thinking and creation of mood-states in particular evoke a cult of melancholy more radically subjective than in any previous period of Russian literature. The problem, as with the melancholic Golden Age, was that the symbolist notion of melancholia as a kind of extra-linguistic, philosophical method coexisted with the more pathological understanding of the condition, giving rise to the same duality of melancholia characteristic of the age of Zhukovskii. This duality was something particularly clear in the case of Aleksandr Blok, a poet who, alongside his melancholy symbolist aesthetic, also exhibited “a

¹⁶⁹ A Pyman, *A History of Russian Symbolism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.60.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, p.80.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, p.10.

¹⁷² Ibid, p.70.

¹⁷³ Ibid, p.73.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, p.79.

strong tendency to clinical depression”, something “which he wrote of and probably actually thought of as premature senility.”¹⁷⁵ As Mark Steinberg has shown, Silver Age melancholia chimed with a more general mood of despondency and foreboding as the Romanov regime limped towards its end in the early twentieth century: “the melancholy malady of the sensitive intellectual, which had not been without its aesthetic pleasures, was reborn as a dangerous popular epidemic.”¹⁷⁶ Steinberg suggests that melancholia became something of a social phenomenon in these years, dominating social and journalistic discourses and imbuing them with a vocabulary of emotional suffering. Increasingly, the fate of the whole Russian empire came to be seen in the same melancholic hues that characterized Silver Age literature. As will be seen in the following chapters, it is against this background of melancholic excess that Zoshchenko’s rejection of inwardness should ultimately be understood.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, p.215.

¹⁷⁶ M D Steinberg, ‘Melancholy and Modernity: Emotions and Social Life in Russia Between the Revolutions’, *Journal of Social History*, 41:4 (2008), p.814.

Chapter 2

Textual Truancies

In approaching Zoshchenko's comic fiction in terms of melancholia, one would perhaps not ordinarily expect to find a wealth of obvious material. His famously short, intricately constructed, comic stories of the twenties not only tend to avoid the word melancholia itself, but also largely steer clear of explicit depictions of melancholic suffering. Moreover, these stories, both in their brevity and in the comically-limited narrator-heroes that tell them, seem to be discursively under-equipped for any kind of systematic exploration of psychological and existential themes. In fact, the abundant humour for which these stories are justly renowned seems, at first glance, to owe much more to the multifaceted play of socio-cultural incongruity so characteristic of the NEP era in which they were written.¹ However, the melancholy in these stories does not really inhere at the level of explicit theme, or even at the level of direct discourse. Appropriately enough for a misery of wordlessness, the melancholy in the stories lies beyond the discursive in a realm of suggestive absence. Indeed, for all its sociological detail and cultural inflection Zoshchenko's wry and inscrutable laughter always echoes over a void. There is an underlying desperation in Zoshchenko's humour, a dark core which makes the laughter both more brittle and, paradoxically enough, more human. Importantly, this comic shadow remains both unspoken and unspeaking, a wordless absence against which the laughter shines, unsettling, uncertain and defiant. Eluding linguistic and narrative grasp, this asymbolic silence is an essential aspect of the comic aesthetic that Zoshchenko achieves in these works, but it is also profoundly melancholic.

¹ This is mirrored in the dominance of socio-cultural approaches that Alexander Zholkovsky has noted in twentieth-century Zoshchenko criticism, irrespective of whether from pro- or anti-Soviet perspectives. A K Zholkovskii, *Poetika nedoveriia*, p. 307.

It was precisely this kind of absence lying at the heart of the text which marked Zoshchenko's stories out for no less a reader than Osip Mandelstam. In *Fourth Prose* (*Chetvertaia proza*, 1930), his eloquently devastating critique of the Soviet literary establishment, Mandelstam argued that absence was central to any genuine literary endeavour: "Genuine work is really Brussels lace; the chief thing in it is that by which the design is supported: air, perforations, absences."² Mandelstam thus envisions textuality defined as much by space as by word, as much by silence as by noise; indeed elsewhere in *Fourth Prose* he suggests that the only literature worthy of the name is really a kind of "stolen air" ("vorovannyi vozdukh").³ Accomplishment in this airy embroidery, this art of absence, was something Mandelstam explicitly attributed to Zoshchenko, of whom he claimed: "Now there's a man for whom absences breathe; now there's a man in whose work Brussels lace lives!"⁴

Of course, Mandelstam does not refer to Zoshchenko's textual truanacies as melancholia; his interest in this aspect of Zoshchenko's work is primarily informed by his concern with the nature of poetic craft and calling. Indeed, it is with this in mind that Mandelstam refers to Zoshchenko's stories as "a bible of work" ("bibliia truda").⁵ In terms of the pun which opens this section of *Fourth Prose*, the word *trud* here refers to both work (as in productive labour) and *the* work (as in the literary work).⁶ Thus, for Mandelstam, Zoshchenko's "bible of work" functions both as an

² «Настоящий труд – это брюссельское кружево. В нем главное то, на чем держится узор: воздух, проколы, прогулы.» О Mandel'shtam, *Chetvertaia proza in Sochineniia: Stikhotvoreniia. Proza. Esse* (Moscow: AST, 2008), p. 501. The date given above refers to the completion of the work rather than its appearance in print; appearing first in the West, *Fourth Prose* was not published in the Soviet Union until 1989.

³ Ibid, p. 490.

⁴ «Вот у кого прогулы дышат, вот у кого брюссельское кружево живет!» Ibid, p. 501.

⁵ Ibid, p. 501.

⁶ The pun, which only partially translates into English, is defined in the first two sentences of section 16 of *Fourth Prose* and opens a continuing play involving cognates of the word *trud* for the rest of the section. The opening sentences of the section are as follows: «Сколько бы я ни трудился, если б я носил на спине лошадей, если б я крутил мельничьи жернова, - все равно никогда я не стану трудящимся. Мой труд, в чем бы он ни выражался, воспринимается как озорство, как беззаконие, как случайность.» Ibid, p. 500.

authoritative source of existential wisdom for survival within the production ethos of the time, and additionally as a guide to the process of textual production and the craft of writing.

Nonetheless, there remains something strikingly, if unintentionally, melancholic about Mandelstam's vision of the text (and particularly the Zoshchenko text) as a fabric woven from both meaning and non-meaning, a site where the presence of absence outweighs the presence of words. It is interesting that he talks of Zoshchenko's textual gaps as places where "absences breathe" and where "Brussels lace lives". The attribution of biological characteristics to these vacant spaces nudges them closer to that living absence, that "insistence without presence" which Kristeva senses in the pre-symbolic non-object of melancholia.⁷ Tellingly, Mandelstam likens the absence that structures the literary text to the hole in a bagel, and values it more than the surrounding dough because "the bagel can be gobbled up, but the hole will remain."⁸ This implicit understanding of the word as the fragile and transitory enclosure of a radical, recalcitrant and infinite wordlessness resonates closely with that "pallor of words" that defines the linguistic melancholia analysed in the first chapter of this study.

Textual Melancholy

A more explicit, if not exactly unproblematic, suggestion of melancholia in Zoshchenko's fiction of the twenties can be found in a letter sent to the writer in 1928 by an enthusiastic group of Moscow workers eager to share their perceptive appreciation of his fiction. In this letter, which was subsequently published in Zoshchenko's *Letters to the Writer* (*Pis'ma k pisatel'iu*, 1929), the authors begin by

⁷ J Kristeva, *Black Sun*, p.13.

⁸ «Бублик можно слопать, а дырка останется.» *Chetvertaia proza*, p. 500.

stressing their own critical seriousness, begging the addressee not to dismiss their letter as “the usual letter of some admirer or other”.⁹ Instead, they insist that they are:

[...] ordinary working people (not in the sense of ‘We Workers!’), who are interested in your stories as stories of a quite different type from the humorous stories of other authors.¹⁰

Seeing the particularity of Zoshchenko’s comic technique directly reflected in his wide appeal, the authors of the letter start with the diversity of his readership in their ambition to understand what sets Zoshchenko’s stories apart from other writers of comic fiction. Interestingly, it is in outlining the breadth of Zoshchenko’s literary appeal through a series of rhetorical questions that they hint strongly at an aspect of Zoshchenko’s humour with explicit appeal to the melancholic character:

Why is your name known to everyone, even at the less cultured level, not to mention the more advanced workers and intelligentsia? Why does even a melancholic come alive at the mention of the name Zoshchenko? Why is someone who hasn’t heard of you regarded with sympathy?¹¹

Although the passage is coloured by an obvious rhetorical inflection, these amateur critics nonetheless clearly suggest that Zoshchenko’s stories exercise an appeal that not only engages the melancholic temperament, but even constitutes something of an antidote. Indeed, there is an insightful and doubtless unintended felicity in their phraseology: the implicit opposition of melancholia and life chimes significantly with the association of melancholia and death identified earlier in this study.¹² The word

⁹ «[П]росим не смотреть на него [письмо] как на обычное письмо какого-нибудь поклонника». М М Zoshchenko, *Pis'ma k pisateliu* in *Sobranie sochinenii*, ed. I Sukhikh, (8 volumes, Moscow: Vremia, 2008), volume entitled *Sentimental'nye povesti*, p. 354.

¹⁰ «[...] простые рабочие люди (не в смысле «мы, рабочие»), интересующиеся вашими рассказами, как рассказами совсем другого рода, чем юмористические рассказы других авторов.» Ibid, p.354.

¹¹ «Почему ваше имя знакомо всем, даже в среде с низким культурным уровнем, не говоря уже про более развитых рабочих и интеллигенцию? Почему даже меланхолический человек, при упоминании имени Зошенко, оживляется? Почему на человека, не слышавшего о вас, смотрят с сожалением?» Ibid, p. 355.

¹² See in particular the discussion of Kleinian melancholia in chapter 1.

choice is, if anything, more telling for being parenthetical in relation to the over-riding rhetorical concerns of the authors of the letter, but would, in any case, seem to suggest there is something more in this reference than a bland evocation of the upbeat nature of the stories.

If these lay critics, however rhetorically, however parenthetically, discern a melancholic resonance in the general appeal of Zoshchenko's comic fiction then it is important to understand how they explain this appeal in terms of technique. In striving to answer the questions posed above, the authors of the letter suggest that:

This is explained by the simple style, the accessibility, and in general by that which contemporary authors of humorous stories try in vain to achieve. Indeed, sometimes reading a story of yours, you laugh not at all the story as a whole, but at one well-chosen word or phrase. And precisely in this lies the strength of your stories, precisely this makes one read them in the most attentive way, following every word.¹³

That their answer offers more by way of suggestion than rigorous critical analysis is perhaps unsurprising in view of the fact that it was originally made in the form of a private letter to the writer by readers whose enthusiasm doubtless exceeded their formal training in literary criticism. Nonetheless, when these lay critics suggest that the humour in Zoshchenko often does not constitute the sum total of a given work, but rather resides in certain linguistic or literary devices, they make a hugely significant observation. By locating the humour in particular devices they implicitly open a non-comic space within these same comic stories. It might reasonably be assumed that whatever they find in Zoshchenko's technique which particularly appeals to the melancholic temperament would reside alongside the laughter in precisely these non-

¹³ «Объясняется это тем же простым стилем, общепонятностью и вообще тем, чего безуспешно добиваются современные авторы юмористических рассказов. Ведь иногда, читая ваш рассказ, смеешься не всему рассказу в целом а одному удачно подобранному слову или фразе. В этом-то и сила, это-то и заставляет внимательнейшим образом, следя за каждым словом, читать ваши рассказы.» *Pis'ma k pisateliu*, p. 37.

comic spaces.¹⁴ Of course, one might object that their understanding of Zoshchenko's humour in purely linguistic terms is too narrow, and, for instance, ignores the not insubstantial physical aspects of Zoshchenko's laughter, but in claiming a non-humorous space in Zoshchenko they surely take a huge step closer to realising their goal of understanding what is particular about Zoshchenko's comic aesthetic.¹⁵

Unfortunately, the nature of the non-comic space that the authors of the letter imply is not really described in any detail; the closest that they come to defining it is by reference to "that which contemporary authors of humorous stories try in vain to achieve." In view of this apparent evasion, it is perhaps tempting to dismiss their insight out of hand as being insufficiently rigorous and far too vague to deserve serious critical attention. However, the most compelling reason for resisting this temptation and trying to develop their suggestive insight further is the obvious joy that Zoshchenko himself took, first in reading, and later in publishing their critical endeavours in *Letters to the Writer*. With barely concealed delight, Zoshchenko says of the letter he received from these enthusiastic readers: "I read it several times and could only marvel at the appearance of such observant critics."¹⁶ He thus endorses both their critical ambition and the insights that these amateur critics propose, describing the letter as "sensible criticism" (*"del'naia kritika"*); importantly, the Russian adjective *del'nyi* carries the implication of rootedness in practice, perhaps the

¹⁴ Interestingly, this suggestion that the humour in the stories resides in particular, linguistic devices dimly foreshadows (in spirit at least) the much more systematic formalist analysis of Zoshchenko's humour undertaken by Mikhail Kreps. Kreps located basic units of humour which he termed the "humoreme" (*"iumorema"*) and devised a typology of twenty-three such humoremes which he saw at work in Zoshchenko's comic fiction. Importantly, Kreps' analysis, like all attempts to locate humour in self-contained units less than the sum of the total text, invariably leave open the space for non-humorous elements. See M Kreps, *Tekhnika komicheskogo u Zoshchenko* (Benson VT: Chalidze Publications, 1986), p.6.

¹⁵ In terms of physical humour in Zoshchenko, one might mention the flapping tickets or the proffered string in 'The Bathhouse' ('Bania', 1925) to name but two examples from a well-known story. See 'Bania', 1:278 and 279.

¹⁶ «Я несколько раз читал его и только диву давался - откуда взялись такие наблюдательные критики.» *Pis'ma k pisateliiu*, p. 357.

cardinal virtue in Zoshchenko's artistic credo.¹⁷ This authorial imprimatur surely obliges one to look again at these non-comic spaces and their particular appeal to the melancholic temperament, and to develop the suggestive vagaries of these "sensible" critics into more critically rigorous conclusions.

It is helpful at this juncture to recall those textual truanicies in Zoshchenko's work that so beguiled Mandelstam. It will be remembered that these enclosed textual absences, by definition non-comic in and of themselves, chimed closely with the melancholic "pallor of words" that characterises Zoshchenko's textual melancholia. It is thus but a small step to combine the intuitive insights of the authorially-endorsed "*del'naia kritika*" and the more concretely-textual ones of Mandelstam to suggest that the absences holding up the design of Zoshchenko's "Brussels lace" can function as an appropriately wordless expression of the melancholia underpinning Zoshchenko's comic aesthetic. An important advantage of this approach is that it maintains a melancholic space in the text that can be read on its own basis, without reference to extra-textual resources. This is something implicit in the example of Zoshchenko's "sensible" critics: their insights into the way Zoshchenko's stories speak to the melancholic temperament are based on close reading alone. They neither appeal to the biographical fact of Zoshchenko's own melancholic sufferings, something which they may well not have known about; nor do they retrospectively read the stories in the

¹⁷ Ibid, p.354. The depth of this and the previous compliment only become obvious when it is remembered that the letter, dated 2nd January 1928, arrived less than a month after the publication of the second edition of *Of What the Nightingale Sang*. This edition of the work appeared in the wake of, and to some extent responded to the storm of criticism that had accompanied the publication of the first edition in March 1927. These vituperative attacks, founded largely on over-simplistic readings of this complex cycle of tales, culminated in a lengthy, hostile review by M. Ol'shevets appearing in *Izvestiia* on the 14th August 1927. In this review Zoshchenko was simplistically equated with the sentimental, but fictional, narrator of the tales, Ol'shevets declaring the author revealed in the cycle to be "the 'sentimental' Zoshchenko" [«сентиментальный Зошенко»; М. Ol'shevets, 'Obyvatel'skii nabat', reprinted in Iu Tomashevskii (ed) *Litso i maska*, p. 148]. This critical episode and the personal and literary stakes involved for Zoshchenko are described in detail by Lesley Milne [*Zoshchenko and the Ilf-Petrov Partnership*, pp. 41-44]. The publication dates are as they appear in Iurii Tomashevskii's 'Khronologicheskaia kanva', p. 347.

light of Zoshchenko's more explicit melancholic concerns of the thirties and forties, something that would have been impossible at the time the letter was written. With this in mind, the current chapter will, in the first instance, seek to read some of the melancholic resonances that can be heard in Zoshchenko's textual truanities on their own basis, only making recourse to extra-textual resources for the purpose of amplification or explanation.

The story 'Lady's Grief' ('Damskoe gore', 1926) offers a useful starting point for this exercise as melancholia is central to making sense of it. In addition to being one of the few works from this period that makes direct reference to melancholia as such, it is also, as shall become clear, almost entirely resistant to interpretation on a purely socio-cultural basis. It thus offers clear pointers for reading the melancholic aspects of those works where the reference to melancholia is more oblique and difficult to discern. The story begins in a boisterous queue at a creamery (*slivochnaia*) where the jostled narrator is waiting patiently to buy butter in order to break his Lenten fast.¹⁸ At this juncture a youngish woman in mourning attire enters the shop, elbows her way to the counter and says something to the assistant which "cannot be heard above the hubbub".¹⁹ It transpires that the woman is seeking to be excused from waiting in the queue on account of her husband's suicide the previous week. Their curiosity piqued, the queue readily accedes to the request and immediately produces a

¹⁸ In fact the story does not explicitly mention the Lenten fast, suggesting only that the narrator is waiting "to break the fast" («пароветься»; see M M Zoshchenko, 'Damskoe gore', 1:335). In Orthodox belief there are several major periods of fasting, however, the Lenten echoes in this story can be deduced in the first instance from the original publication date. It first appeared in 1926 in the seventeenth number of the weekly Leningrad satirical magazine *Begemot* (see Iu Tomashevskii, 'Primechaniia', 1:547). This would date its publication to the last week of April 1926. Palm Sunday, the last day of the great Lenten fast, fell on the 25th April in 1926, according to the secular Gregorian calendar, with Easter Sunday falling a week later on the 2nd May (see the 'Orthodox Paschal Calculator' at <http://www.noeticSPACE.com/paschalion/> which was accessed on the 6th May 2010). This topicality strongly suggests the reference here is to the Lenten fast.

¹⁹ «За шумом не слышать.» 1:335.

barrage of questions.²⁰ Thus while the widow's eggs and soured cream are being measured out, she begins to tell her tale: it turns out that the husband's suicide resulted from his being "a melancholic" ("melankholik"), that "it was forty days ago last week" ("na proshloi nedel' sorok dnei bylo") and that the shot which killed him came "from a revolver" ("iz revol'veru").²¹ Her dairy products wrapped and her story told, the widow then begins to leave the shop. However, before she reaches the door a figure in the queue interjects: "So her husband shot himself, but why such a hurry, and why eggs without queuing? It's not right!"²² Bemused, "the lady glanced back scornfully at the figure and left."²³

The moral of this story is shrouded in ambiguity. At first glance, the timing of the original publication to coincide with the onset of Holy Week and the story's setting in a queue of "housewives" ("domashnie khoziaiki") who, like the narrator, have presumably observed the Lenten fast would seem to suggest a satirical focus on the persistence of religious fervour in the face of enthusiastic official hostility and repression. This kind of satirical targeting of pre-revolutionary hangovers was very much stock-in-trade of NEP-era journalistic satire. In this regard it is worth noting that the narrator is particularly struck by the number of shoppers, describing "heaps of folks" standing inside the shop.²⁴ Thus the queue, swelled by the faithful, is described as sizeable even in a culture in which long queues were very much the norm. However, this theme is really only a part of the story. In fact, with the appearance of the widow and the revelation of the suicide it recedes almost completely, making it

²⁰ «И все с любопытством стали рассматривать эту гражданку.» 1:335.

²¹ 1:335-336.

²² «Ну ихний супруг застрелившись. А почему такая спешка и яйца без очереди? Неправильно!» 1:336.

²³ «Дама презрительно оглянулась на фигуру и вышла.» 1:336.

²⁴ «Народищу уйма»; 1:335.

seem to be more of a jumping-off point for the consideration of other concerns which are never very clearly articulated.

In fact the melancholic suicide changes the tone of the story completely, and from the moment it is introduced it hangs awkwardly over the whole work. To a degree, it is associated with the theme of the Lenten satire through the reference to the “forty days” of mourning traditional in Orthodox belief, yet it comes ultimately to eclipse the original theme. To a certain extent, its importance is underlined visually, for the reader learns of the suicide’s melancholic suffering at almost the exact typographical centre of the story.²⁵ The line in question is: “‘Melancholic; that’s what he was’ said the citizen.” (“‘Melankholik on u menia byl’ skazala grazhdanka.”)²⁶ What is important here is the way in which the sentence structure adds emphasis by placing the word “melankholik” at the beginning. Moreover, being cast as direct speech in which the introductory verb follows the speech, the word will always come at the start of a line regardless of typographical variation from one edition to another. Thus the word “melankholik” has a visual prominence which, while not absolute, remains in excess of its relative discursive importance. Moreover, in inverse proportion to the relative visual emphasis afforded this line, it is simultaneously subjected to several levels of narrative distancing. Firstly, it is attributed to a character whose death preceded the start of the story. Then, it is made to stand at a kind of double remove from any putative authorial voice by being cast initially as the direct speech of the widow, before being made more distant still by the refraction of the whole tale through the voice of the fictional *skaz* narrator.

²⁵ The word “melankholik” occurs at line thirty out of fifty-seven in the edition of the text used for this study making it almost central in typographic terms. In terms of word-count, it appears at word 172 out of 367. The obviousness of this physical centrality does, of course, vary according to typographical layout; it is much more obvious when the story occupies a single page as it does in the original publication in *Begemot* than when it is spread over two or more as in most collected editions or anthologies.

²⁶ 1:335.

This paradox of relative visual prominence allied to narrative distance is of the greatest importance, and indeed is even reflected in the narrative substance of the tale itself. The widow declares that the aspect of her husband's suicide that causes her the most distress is the fact that she had to *see* the episode herself:

The main thing was that *everything happened before my eyes*. I was sitting in the next room. I wanted, I don't remember, to do something or other, and I wasn't thinking anything at all, suddenly there was a terrible sound: in a word, a shot. I ran there: smoke, a ringing in my ears ... *and everything before my eyes*.²⁷

The repetition of "before my eyes", which frames the widow's otherwise disjointed barrage of sense impressions, quickly becomes something of a tag-line, being repeated a total of four times by the end of the story. Her husband's melancholy is, for her, all too visual a phenomenon: when someone in the queue tries to suggest that suicides happen, the widow can only reassert the overwhelming visibility of her experience "with a certain hurt in her voice".²⁸ Yet tragically, the widow ultimately fails to translate this visual poignancy into narrative effect. Her trauma remains personal and the crowd in the queue remain ultimately unconvinced; they let her tell her tale, but in the final count her difficult situation is deemed insufficient to translate into social advantage. This is something with which even the most empathetic reader must surely concur; no matter how sympathetically disposed to her position, one cannot really see how it translates into "eggs without queuing".

This disjuncture between the poignancy of the felt experience and the pallor of narrative possibility is really the nub of the story. In its evocation of the painful distance between personal, emotional meaning and socially-compelling discourse it

²⁷ «Главное, все на моих глазах произошло. Я сижу в соседней комнате. Хочу, не помню, что-то такое сделать и вообще ничегошеньки не предполагаю, вдруг ужасный звук происходит. Выстрел, одним словом. Бегу туда – дым, в ушах звон ... и все на моих глазах.» 1:336 (my italics; ellipsis in the original).

²⁸ «С некоторой обидой в голосе»; 1:336.

also constitutes the primary melancholic content of the piece, far more immediate and affecting than the bland and distanced reference to the concept at the discursive level. Importantly, the story remains ultimately inaccessible to a purely social reading; it is only when the melancholic disjuncture between perception and word is taken on board that the story's moral opens up before the reader. This disjuncture tells in the duration of the widow's mourning: if the suicide took place forty days ago the previous week, then the traditional Orthodox period of public mourning is over and the widow's continuing pain should now become a private penance. Yet this is something she is clearly unwilling to accept as indicated by her request for preferential treatment in the queue. However, no matter how arbitrary this mourning convention may be, and no matter how inadequate to the personal magnitude of her pain it evidently is, for the faithful that surround her in the shop the period of public mourning is over and her claim for special treatment do not compel at the level of social discourse.

Thus the widow is faced with a stark choice between acceptance of a pallid social discourse which is inadequate to the pain she feels or private cultivation of personal grief outside of the social realm. That the story urges the former course of action becomes clearer when observing the narrator's changing relation to the widow in the course of the tale. Interestingly, the way the widow is described by the narrator changes as the story unfolds. At the beginning, when her private woes "cannot be heard above the hubbub", she is described as "little lady" ("damochka").²⁹ However, as soon as she tells of her grief, first to the shop assistant, and then the queue as a whole she is described by all as "citizen" ("grazhdanka").³⁰ This new mode of address stresses how, for the period in which she is trying to communicate her sorrow she is

²⁹ 1:335.

³⁰ 1:335-336.

part of the social collective (and part of the post-revolutionary here and now). Thus it comes as no surprise that once her tale is told and she once again disengages from the collective, when she “sadly nodded her head and moved towards the exit”, the narrator describes her once more as a “lady” (“dama”).³¹ Thus, the moral begins to emerge: the story urges the necessity of grafting one’s felt experience into available discursive possibilities as the only alternative to melancholia. Thus, the widow’s failure to translate the raw impressionistic basis of her experience into words, her failure to vivify a pallid language, leaves her excluded and marginalised, standing outside the crowd and glancing back “scornfully” from a space that echoes the melancholic isolation of her dead husband. In an echo of the Lenten theme that opened the tale, she is still trapped in her self-imposed desert exile, while all around her ‘come alive’ in public celebration of the Resurrection.

The melancholia that is so crucial to the interpretation of this story thus resides not in words, but in the textual gap between the felt experience of selfhood and extant social discourse. This was something very close to Zoshchenko’s heart at this time, for the composition of ‘Lady’s Grief’ dates from a period in Zoshchenko’s life when his mental health was at an extremely low ebb.³² The sense in which the impossibility of naming his pain loomed large in Zoshchenko’s life at this time can be gauged from a letter he wrote from his sanatorium outside Leningrad to his fellow Serapion Mikhail Slonimskii. In this letter he formally offers his apologies for not attending a Serapion reunion in February 1926, blaming his absence from this event, as well as his cancellation of readings at Kharkov, Odessa and Moscow, on heart trouble. However, the letter suddenly becomes more intense as Zoshchenko bluntly changes tack, confessing that: “[...] to tell the truth, my heart is not actually that bad, it’s quite

³¹ «Дама печально кивнула головой и пошла к выходу». 1:336.

³² See Iu Tomashevskii, ‘Khronologicheskaiia kanva’, p. 346.

well even, but I so terribly didn't and don't want to appear. You, I hope, understand me."³³ We know from the biographical record that Zoshchenko's stay at Detskoe was connected with his mental ill health, and the circuitous appeal to Slonimskii relies upon his fellow Serapion being able to guess this fact. However, what is fascinating here is that, despite the frank and affecting confession and the aborted excuse, Zoshchenko still cannot find the words to explain his situation. In fact, rather than re-writing the letter, he leaves it visibly unsaid, his melancholia inhering in the discursive gap created by his aborted excuse; he trusts the wordless translation of his emotional pain to friendship, suggestion and context.

As will be argued in chapter four, this period in the mental life of the writer led to, and in part occasioned, an increasing directness in Zoshchenko's approach to the theme of melancholia, a change in which his naming of the affliction played a not insubstantial part. As the foregoing analysis suggested, 'Lady's Grief' combines the first stirrings of this new directness with a preference for the wordless expression of melancholic themes through gaps and textual absences. This duality makes 'Lady's Grief' something of a transitional piece; it was written in a style typical of Zoshchenko's work of the twenties, but contained the first, tentative indications of a franker approach to the theme of melancholia. It is precisely this duality that makes the story so important for the current study: by treating the theme of melancholia with simultaneous prominence and distance it serves to guide the reader in finding the more oblique and muted textual sources of melancholia in other works from this period. It thus serves as a gateway to understanding that melancholic space that Zoshchenko's "sensible" critics seemed to find in his works.

³³ «[...] если говорить правда, то сердце у меня не так уже плохое, даже хорошее, но просто ужасно не хотелось и не хочется выступать. Ты, надеюсь, меня понимаешь.» Letter from M M Zoshchenko to M L Slonimskii dated 06.02.1926 in E Lemming (ed) *"Serapionovy brat'ia" v zerkalakh perepiski* (Moscow: Graf, 2004), p.399.

Intoxicating Words

It will be remembered that in 'Lady's Grief' the melancholic theme initially appeared from behind, before ultimately eclipsing, an apparently unconnected satirical concern with persisting religious belief. While the thematic predominance of melancholia at the expense of the ostensible satirical focus makes 'Lady's Grief' highly unusual among Zoshchenko's comic works of this period, the thematic intertwining of melancholia with satirical polemic as such is actually far from unique. In many stories the theme of melancholia remains, to a greater or lesser extent, an unnamed, shadowy presence haunting the narrative and frequently disrupting the satirical thrust of the work with a troubling ambivalence. This is something readily observable in the story 'The Living Corpse (A True Story)' ['Zhivoi trup (istinnoe proisshestvie)', 1924], in which just such thematic ambivalence is elevated to a position of structural centrality. This story, purportedly a satire on drunkenness, is remarkably simple in terms of plot structure: having finished work for the day, a Leningrad worker called Fedia Zhukov goes on a drinking spree with friends in the course of which he falls into unconsciousness and is taken to hospital, ultimately coming round to find himself lying naked in the hospital morgue. The comic potential in this straightforward, almost anecdotal plot is obvious, but it is complicated by a layered narrative structure that sounds something of an unsettling counterpoint to the humour.

In narrative terms, the story divides naturally into two parts: it is introduced by a sort of editorial preface written in a mock-journalistic style before, in the second part, the narrative voice passes to the hero himself, who is allowed to narrate his own experiences largely without mediation. Importantly, the editorial introduction articulates the story's satirical concern with drunkenness before the reader even reaches the hero's own account:

A strange story took place involving a certain worker. So strange is this story that, on learning it, no doubt half of our subscribers will give up drinking. But don't fret, dear subscriber! Giving up drink is not so frightening. The author, for example, having drunk everything except paraffin at one time or another, has also dropped this harmful habit. It's nothing; you get by.³⁴

With the commencement of the account narrated by the hero himself a subtle divergence emerges from the 'editorially'-imposed temperance moral articulated in the first part of the story. Indeed, the narrator-hero begins his account with the declaration: "Now I don't touch beer".³⁵ What is immediately noticeable is the contraction of satirical focus from the condemnation of alcoholism in the widest sense (the abuse of "everything except paraffin") to the much more particular repudiation of beer alone. Moreover, Fedia then justifies his shying away from beer in the very next sentence with the curious suggestion that: "my soul can't take it".³⁶ This odd phrasing creates a comic effect of incongruity, but also introduces a personal note into the broad-brush satirical purpose proposed in the introduction.

As the story itself unfolds, these cracks in the hermeneutic integration of the two parts of the story are worked still wider, becoming increasingly obvious in the description of the obscure mental and physical collapse that looms so large in this "strange story". At the onset of the collapse, the hero recalls that "we were drinking and drinking, then suddenly, after the fifth bottle, I got blind drunk and sat there on the chair, pale and miserable."³⁷ Arguably, there is a discrepancy between the amount of beer drunk and the seriousness of the collapse: five bottles of beer, although a

³⁴ «Странная история произошла с одним рабочим. До того странная эта история, что, узнавши ее, половина наших подписчиков, наверное, бросит пить. Но не робей, дорогой подписчик! Бросить пить – это не так страшно. Автор, например, пивший в свое время все, кроме керосина, тоже бросил эту вредную привычку. И ничего. Жить можно.» 'Zhivoi trup (istinnoe proisshestvie)', 1:259.

³⁵ «Я пива теперь не пью»; 1:259.

³⁶ «Душа не принимает.» 1:259.

³⁷ «Пили, пили. Только вдруг, после пятой, я ужасно окосел и сижу на стуле белый, скучаю.» 1:259.

considerable quantity, nonetheless seems an insufficient explanation for the sort of collapse that rendered Fedia “just like a corpse.”³⁸ Moreover, beer seems an unlikely intoxicant in this kind of plot: anecdotal tales of alcoholic oblivion are hardly uncommon in the annals of Russian humour, but the intoxicating agent is usually much stronger.

Looking beyond the drink, Fedia’s own description of his experience offers further grounds for doubting its being simply an instance of drunkenness. It is interesting that the hero describes his drunken state using the colloquial locution *okoset’*, only imperfectly rendered here by the English idiom “blind drunk”. This verb literally means to go cross-eyed or blind in one eye, and is only figuratively used to mean getting drunk. In the context of the drinking spree (and, importantly, that of the pre-established moral) the reader naturally assumes a figurative reference to drunkenness. However, the literal meaning of sensory impairment still lingers at the edge of the reader’s mind, implying, nonetheless, that the hero’s symptoms might derive as much from a generalised misperception of reality as from drunkenness in particular. The semantic inexactitude here derives from a reliance on figurative description that is more suggestive than definitive. A similar ambiguity results from the alienated boredom rather thinly translated here as “miserable”. The Russian verb *skuchat’* is one of those semantically expansive Russian words which are largely irreducible to single English equivalents; it can embrace aspects of boredom, pining, weariness, disinterest, even melancholy. The point here is not that any of these descriptions necessarily contradicts the predetermined moral of the story, rather that their semantic imprecision, and the diffuse suggestive potential that results, eludes simple reduction to alcoholic intoxication as proposed at the outset of the tale.

³⁸ «[...] все равно как покойник.» 1:259.

The explanatory potential of the satirical moral proposed in the first part of the story is further eroded by the conduct of the hero's friends following the collapse. Interestingly, as they carry the lifeless Fedia home they do not beg their friend be excused for public drunkenness, as one might expect if excessive drinking were the obvious cause of his behaviour, but rather they apologize on Fedia's behalf for "the weakness of the organism".³⁹ This unusual phrase with its distinctly physiological ring seems to suggest a more generalised bodily failure than a simple reaction to excessive drinking. Once home, and with no more alcoholic consumption, the condition inexplicably worsens, and the hero declares: "I lost consciousness and lay like a statue."⁴⁰ Fedia's terrified wife calls the community doctor (*kommunal'nyi vrach*), who echoes the friends' suggestion of physiological dysfunction:

"Something, he said, has got into his organism from the beer. One intestine, perhaps, has strayed onto another. Cart him off to hospital. They'll figure it out there."⁴¹

Despite being a thinly veiled admission of professional bafflement, the doctor's comically garbled diagnosis nonetheless points more to non-specific toxicity than intoxication, more to impaired organ function than alcoholic impairment.

The hero's description of his friends' attempts to rouse him casts further doubt on the alcoholic aetiology of Fedia's collapse. Faced with his pallid impassivity, his friends repeatedly call his name, "but *their* Fedia opened his mouth wide and didn't respond."⁴² This open mouth, poised for disclosure but only capable of silence, seems symbolically appropriate to the sense of puzzlement that the hero's account generates. What is more confusing still is the way that this line, purportedly narrated by Fedia

³⁹ «Извинились ребята перед народом за слабость организма»; 1:259.

⁴⁰ «Я сомлел и лежу что статуя.» 1:259.

⁴¹ «Что-то, говорит, у него в организме от пива заскочило. Кишка, может, на кишку зашла. Везите его в больницу. Там разберут.» 1:259.

⁴² «А ихний Федя рот раскрыл и не отзывается.» 1:259. *My italics.*

himself, makes reference to himself in the third person. In a *post factum* account such as this, placing the historical narrated self in the third person separates it from the narrating voice, creating the effect of a past self now alien to the telling self. This is not just a temporal distance; it is a difference of existential perspective and it bespeaks a radical fracture in the experienced continuity of selfhood. This broken sense of subjectivity no doubt owes much to the failure of memory that Fedia later admits to experiencing once he reaches hospital, something he describes as akin to “an iron wall” being “lowered before” him.⁴³ The effect of this rupture in the coherence of the narrating self is to posit the narrator as his own spectator in a way that surely owes less to alcohol abuse than to some undefined malady of the self.

If the temperance moral suggested in the first part of the story seems to grow increasingly problematic as the tale progresses, then it is important to note that the reader is offered very little by way of concrete hermeneutic alternative: the psychological and physiological suggestions above only ever remain muted and oblique. The reader, thus, takes huge interest in the hero's own desperate attempts to make sense of his position once he has regained consciousness in the hospital morgue. Importantly, Fedia “only woke up from cold and hunger.”⁴⁴ Disorientated by the gap in his memory and by the fact that “all around it was dark”, the hero tries valiantly to find his bearings in his starkly biological surroundings.⁴⁵ Completely naked, the hero's desperate attempts to locate himself flash comic against the forbidding darkness that envelopes him:

⁴³ «А дальше я ничего не помню. Как стена железная опустилась передо мной.» 1:260.

⁴⁴ «Только просыпаюсь я от холода и голода.» 1:260.

⁴⁵ «Кругом темно.» 1:260.

I wanted to light a match, to get my bearings. I slapped at my pocket; there's no pocket - just a naked leg. I slapped at the tunic - a naked belly.⁴⁶

Denuded of all external help, human or material, the hero has nothing to pit against this unyielding darkness but his insistent inner voice and its plaintive yearning for any kind of meaning:

'Why', I thought, 'is it dark? What kind of dark is this? Why', I thought, 'such nonsense? Where am I exactly?' I sat up and took a look: I'm naked, sitting on boards; on my foot is a ticket with 17 on it; all around are either heaps of sick people, or heaven knows what, or corpses. I went faint I was so scared! I thought, 'Where am I exactly?'⁴⁷

This voice in the darkness tries desperately to insert the hero's displaced self into a framework of meaning; it searches wildly for narrative hand-holds to make sense of a cold, biological reality and the disturbing proximity of death. He gradually feels his way to the conclusion that: "I fainted from the beer and was taken for a corpse."⁴⁸ Significantly, reaching this conclusion heralds the approach of footsteps which break his painfully hermetic ruminations. The footsteps turn out to belong to a janitor who is understandably terrified at noise and movement coming from the morgue. Fedia calls to him and gives comic chase, running naked through the hospital with his ticket flapping wildly, all the while plaintively declaring his resurrection to the fleeing doubter: "It's me, Fedia Zhukov! Alive ..."⁴⁹ Crucially, it is this point of social interaction that marks the end of Fedia's ordeal. He is eventually given a bed, receives visitors and is even offered a drink. However, he turns the offer of a drink

⁴⁶ «Хочу спичку чиркануть, осмотреться. Хлопс за карман. А кармана нету – одна нога голая. Хлопс за гимнастерку – живот голый.» 1:260.

⁴⁷ «Почему, думаю, темно? За какое самое это темно? Что, думаю, за пустяки? Где ж это я такое? Сел. Смотрю: сижу на досках голый, а на ноге номерок 17. А кругом не то больные свалены, не то не поймешь что, не то покойники. До чего я сомлел, до чего испугался! Где ж это я, думаю?» 1:260.

⁴⁸ «[Я] от пива в обморок свалился, а меня за покойника приняли.» 1:260.

⁴⁹ «[Э]то я – Федя Жуков! Живой ...» 1:260.

down with all the self-conscious zeal of the newly converted: “‘No,’ I said, ‘I won’t. I don’t drink, won’t even touch the stuff.’” He even makes his abstinence sound categorical by insisting: “That’s how I gave up the drink.”⁵⁰

Thus by the end of the piece the hero seemingly comes to embrace the ‘editorial’ interpretation of his story as a parable about the dangers of alcohol abuse. However, those earlier ambivalent notes have not really been adequately suppressed, and in case the impatient reader tries to ignore them for the sake of hermeneutic neatness, they are bluntly re-iterated in the very next line. On learning that the janitor who discovered Fedia in the morgue has taken to visiting him, we are told: “We’ve even become friends and shared a couple of bottles of stout.”⁵¹ Thus the hero effectively contradicts his own moral almost as soon as it is articulated and leaves the reader faced not only with the unresolved narrative ambiguities suggested above, but also with a comic display of bad faith on the part of the hero.

Leaving aside the hero’s apparent bad faith for the moment and concentrating on the unresolved ambiguities, it is clear from the foregoing analysis that they derive in the first instance from the cumulative effect of all the hermeneutic discordances that emerge during the telling of Fedia’s tale. However, it is also important to note how they find their place in the story through the comic hyperbole that colours the whole piece. Despite the assertion of the story’s veracity in the subtitle, the central conceit is clearly a comic device, for even in the most debilitating alcoholic stupor one would not expect complete cessation of vital signs. The real truth of this comic exaggeration is the allegorical account it offers of an experience of apathy and prostration akin to a living death, one that may just as much be conceived of as melancholic as alcoholic. Certainly there would be plenty of grounds for

⁵⁰ « - Нету, говорю, будет. Не пью и в рот хмельного не беру. Так и бросил пить.» 1:261.

⁵¹ «Даже мы с ним подружились и выпили по бутылочке портера.» 1:261.

understanding Fedia's prostration in terms of melancholia: the disruption in the experience of coherent selfhood, the retreat from reality, the associations with death and the failure to find words adequate to the experience all chime readily with the narcissism and linguistic alienation described earlier in this study as "the pallor of words". Yet, crucially, it is not categorically expressed as such; melancholia remains only one hermeneutic possibility among others. This is of the greatest importance for understanding Zoshchenko's artistic practice of this period: whereas a later Zoshchenko might use the word melancholia, this is emphatically not what the story invites the reader to do. What the Zoshchenko of this story challenges the reader to do is to accept the hermeneutic disjuncture between the twice-articulated moral of the story and the ambivalent nature of the story itself, and to live with the ambiguity created by this textual truancy.

The reasons for embracing this ambiguity are implied in the very fact of the companionship and care that Fedia finds at the close of the story. Fedia's case can be helpfully compared here with that of the widow in 'Lady's Grief'. It will be remembered that the widow in this story was effectively given the floor and an attentive audience from the moment she entered the shop, but then, by stubbornly insisting on the particularity of her experience, failed to translate it into a shareable discourse and thus alienated herself from the collective. The trajectory of her story thus leads from unimpeded social and linguistic interaction at the beginning to wordless alienation at the close. Fedia's tale is the perfect inverse of this. Interestingly, there are no words directly attributed to him prior to his waking up in the morgue: his collapse and admission to hospital are narrated by him *ex post facto*, with his reported speech only appearing after he regained consciousness. In fact the abiding impression of him before this is the open-mouthed wordlessness with which

he greeted his friends' anxious entreaties. By the close, however, Fedia, is born again in speech and, by inscribing himself into an extant social discourse in the form of the Soviet anti-alcohol campaign, he ends the story re-integrated into the body social. Thus, explaining subjective experience by adopting a readily available discourse with substantial cultural purchase seems infinitely preferable to the uncertain project of forging new words adequate to this experience but almost certainly without any cultural currency.

In view of all this, the reader might even be inclined to find some good in Fedia's comic bad faith. In fact there is a particular sense in which his repudiation of intoxication is perfectly authentic: the grafting of a personal experience onto an extant social discourse and the acceptance of the hermeneutic discordances that result is, in some sense, eschewing the intoxicating power of words. Fedia's experience, in contradistinction to that of the widow in 'Lady's Grief', does not depend on the word being perfectly adequate to every register of selfhood. There remains an absence at the heart of his account which, while it renders the words pallid, distanced and provisional, nonetheless makes them both practical and non-intoxicating. His tale is, therefore, not just a denigration of alcoholic intoxication as a social evil, but also a repudiation of the disruptive effect of intoxication in the widest sense on the sobriety of the soul. It is thus, without contradicting the satirical moral advanced by the 'editor', nevertheless of a substantially different order. By re-integrating him into cultural and symbolic participation, Fedia's appropriation of the anti-alcohol campaign to make sense of his experience has yielded a profound truth, but, importantly, it is fundamentally a subjective truth. It is this that accounts for the disjuncture that remains between the two parts of the story: the 'editorial' introduction

with its satirical moral and the account of the narrator-hero with its adumbration of a personal truth.

The disjuncture between the two parts of the story perhaps becomes clearer when it is realised that the bifurcated nature of the story is an inventive structural parody of the Soviet *feuilleton*. The *feuilleton*, a standard form of Soviet satirical journalism in the twenties, involved the journalistic re-working of letters from readers or reports from rural and urban correspondents so that the reported incidents were located in the context of “larger social and political questions.”⁵² This process of generalisation, as described by Leonid Ershov, sought to coax out the social and political significance inhering in particular real-life events:

In the journalistic *feuilleton* the essence of the real-life phenomenon is revealed not through the form inherent in this phenomenon as it is in a story, but through analogy, comparison, by means of allegory. By being worked into a *feuilleton*, the real-life fact is directly elevated to the typical, by-passing the stage of its embodiment in artistic forms. As a result of its being opened up by the *feuilleton*, the minor concern of the individual incident becomes major; the private fact acquires a social resonance.⁵³

This forging of a connection between “the individual incident” and its “social resonance” is clearly reflected in the two parts of ‘The Living Corpse’. However, where the *feuilleton* strives to reveal the general in the particular and the objective in the subjective, Zoshchenko’s story provocatively does the reverse. It takes an extant, ‘floating’ social moral and reveals its private resonance for a particular Soviet citizen; this is reflected in the fact that the social moral comes first, before Fedia’s account.

⁵² J Hicks, *Mikhail Zoshchenko and the Poetics of Skaz* (Nottingham: Astra Press, 2000), p. 117. See pp. 116-117 for an analysis of the Soviet *feuilleton* and its ambivalent place in Zoshchenko’s fiction.

⁵³ «В публицистическом фельетоне сущность жизненного явления раскрывается не через форму, присущую этому явлению, как в рассказе, а через аналогию, сравнение, посредством аллегории. Жизненный факт при помощи фельетонной обработки непосредственно, минуя стадию воплощения его в художественные образы, возводится к типическому. Малая тема отдельного случая переходит в результате развертывания фельетона в большую, частный факт приобретает социальное звучание.» L F Ershov, *Sovetskaia satiricheskaia proza 20kh godov* (Moscow-Leningrad: Akademiia nauk SSSR, 1960), p.146. The same source contains a comprehensive history of the Soviet *feuilleton* in the twenties, see pp. 98-156.

Interestingly, in accordance with its epistemological inversion of the *feuilleton* technique Zoshchenko's story also deploys the same "analogy, comparison" and "allegory" that Ershov sees as instrumental in the art the *feuilleton*. As has been suggested above, the drunkenness that the hero repudiates offers a description of an experience that could alternatively be called melancholia. Thus, the theme of drunkenness in the story can be thought of as metaphorically analogous to melancholia. It should be emphasised at this juncture that at no point in any of the reminiscences of Zoshchenko by his contemporaries is there any suggestion that he had an alcohol problem; moreover, in the autobiographical section of *Before Sunrise* the author-figure notes his need for abstinence to control a heart problem.⁵⁴ These biographical facts surely reinforce the proposition that drunkenness functions as a metaphor in his works. In fact as a metaphor for melancholia, alcoholism has much to recommend itself, not least of which is a suitably august classical lineage: Aristotle's musings on melancholia in his *Problemata* invoked the comparison with drinking wine and thus set a classical precedent for just such comparative suggestion.⁵⁵ There are, of course, more immediate reasons for the appropriateness of alcohol as an allegorical means of describing melancholia: alcohol is a depressant; it skews the perception of reality; it weakens conscious control; in excess it often leads to a retreat into the self; frequent indulgence of it becomes a habit that is hard to shake. It is therefore unsurprising that alcoholism in Zoshchenko can often facilitate a parallel, metaphoric discussion of melancholia. Of course, this is not to say that every alcoholic in Zoshchenko is a melancholic; nor is it to say that the metaphoric reference to melancholia is either predominant, or even obligatory; but, to varying degrees of obliqueness it is there to be read. It is present, for instance, in the story

⁵⁴ *Pered voskhodom solntsa*, 3:486.

⁵⁵ Aristotle, *Problemata*, XXX, in J Radden (ed), *The Nature of Melancholy: from Aristotle to Kristeva* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 59.

‘The Earthquake’ (‘Zemletriasenie’, 1929) which is analysed in some depth in chapter four of this study. It is also to be observed in a more oblique manifestation in the well-known story ‘Lemonade’ (‘Limonad’, 1926).

This latter story, although written in a much lighter comic key, is thematically connected with ‘The Living Corpse’ through the common depiction of failed attempts to give up alcohol. The narrator of the tale is also prone to the same comic self-contradiction as Fedia Zhukov from ‘The Living Corpse’, something that becomes obvious from the opening lines of the story:

I, of course, am a non-drinker. If I do ever drink, then it’s just a snifter, for the sake good manners or to keep pleasant company. I don’t consume more than two bottles at once no matter what. My health won’t allow it. Once, I remember, on my former Saint’s day I knocked back a good few quarts. But that was in my young, strong years, when my heart beat desperately in my chest and varied thoughts flitted through my head. But now I’m getting old.⁵⁶

As the hero stumbles into confessing a greater and greater alcohol intake, the progressive contradiction of his opening pretence to abstinence literally builds sentence by sentence to evoke the hero’s failing willpower with a lightly comic touch. This cheerfully unknowing self-contradiction is reminiscent of Fedia Zhukov from ‘The Living Corpse’, a comparison that is deepened by the way both heroes’ ambivalent resolution to give up alcohol originates in failing health and ridiculous medical intervention. For the hero of ‘Lemonade’, it is the drastic suggestion of multiple missing organs and a comic diagnosis of “complete devaluation” (“*polnaia deval'vatsiia*”) from a “veterinary assistant” (“*vetinarnyi fel'dsher*”) of his

⁵⁶ «Я, конечно, человек непьющий. Ежели другой раз и выпью, то мало – так, приличия ради или славную компанию поддержать. Больше как две бутылки мне враз нипочем не употребить. Здоровье не позволяет. Один раз, помню, в день своего бывшего ангела, я четверть выкушал. Но это было в молодые, крепкие годы, когда сердце отчаянно в груди билось и в голове мелькали разные мысли. А теперь старею.» ‘Limonad’, 1:362.

acquaintance which prompts the hero to take his health more seriously.⁵⁷ Later a proper doctor, presumably more versed in specifically human anatomy, provides a more satisfactory appraisal of the hero's generally rude health, suggesting only that he might give up alcohol, "otherwise death might occur."⁵⁸

Thus, as in 'The Living Corpse', death makes an appearance, albeit a far less threatening and far more bathetic one. Nonetheless, it has an appropriately powerful effect on the hero:

And, of course, I'm not keen on dying. I love living. I'm still a young man. I only just hit forty-three at the start of NEP. You could say I'm in the full bloom of strength and health.⁵⁹

The extent to which the intimation of proximate death acts on the hero is implicit in his comic assertion of youth so soon after his earlier assertion of senescence. Moreover, his risible "only just hit forty-three at the start of NEP" (which would make him forty-eight at the time the story was published) bespeaks a tragicomic willed rejuvenation.⁶⁰ This perhaps resonates with the sense of rebirth that accompanied Fedia's waking-up in the morgue in 'The Living Corpse', and provides a fascinating foreshadowing of the more sustained interrogation of aging and rejuvenation in the later work *Youth Restored*. Either way, the fear of death, no matter how comically refracted, steels the hero's determination to give up alcohol: "So I gave up just like that."⁶¹

⁵⁷ 1:362.

⁵⁸ «[И]наче очень просто смерть может приключиться.» 1:362.

⁵⁹ «А помирать, конечно, мне неохота. Я жить люблю. Я человек еще молодой. Мне только-только в начале нэпа сорок три года стукнуло. Можно сказать, в полном расцвете сил и здоровья.» 1:362.

⁶⁰ The New Economic Policy was inaugurated after the X Party Congress in March 1921; 'Lemonade' was published in 1926 in the forty-seventh number of the weekly satirical journal *Begemot* (see Iu Tomashevskii, 'Primechaniia', 1:548), dating its publication to the last week in November 1926. Thus it is over five years since NEP was conceived and the narrator must therefore be forty-eight.

⁶¹ «Взял и бросил.» 1:362.

This resolution immediately sets the comic clock ticking on the hero's crumbling resolve: "I'm not drinking; still not drinking; not drinking for an hour; not drinking for two."⁶² As the tension builds, the reader waits for it all to go wrong. It is not a long wait for temptation strikes unexpectedly when the hero goes to the canteen for his meal and orders a drink. It all begins promisingly enough with the hero virtuously eschewing alcohol and opting for something "a bit softer" ("*pomiagche*") like lemonade. This duly arrives "in a decanter" perched comically "on a cultured tray".⁶³ However, pouring himself some, the hero senses something strange:

I felt something: seems to be vodka. I poured some more; good God, vodka! What the devil! I poured the rest: absolutely genuine vodka. 'Bring some more!' I cried.⁶⁴

It is interesting that he 'feels' the alcohol first, before then comically iterating the sensation to an apparently doubting conscious self. This repetition, of course, affords the reader ample chance to laugh at the way the hero's mental confirmation of his first impressions quickly degenerates into alcoholic craving. However, it simultaneously, if more subtly, distances feeling from thought, and sensation from word, thereby locating the hero's weakness for alcohol in an unconscious realm separate from language.

Having completely satisfied himself as to the alcoholic nature of the drink (and having thus satisfied his alcoholic craving) the hero pays the bill and mentions the fortuitous substitution to the staff of the canteen.⁶⁵ To this he receives the candid reply:

⁶² «Не пью и не пью. Час не пью, два не пью.» 1:362.

⁶³ «Приносят, конечно, мне лимонаду на интеллигентном подносе. В графине.» 1:363.

⁶⁴ «[Ч]увствую: кажись, водка. Налил еще. Ей-богу, водка. Что за черт! Налил остатки – самая настоящая водка.

- Неси, кричу, еще!» 1:363.

⁶⁵ «[З]амечание все-таки сделал.» 1:363.

That's what we've always called lemonade: an entirely legitimate word, even in times gone by... As for real lemonade, I'm sorry, we don't stock it – there's no demand.⁶⁶

What is interesting here is the implied opposition between the “legitimate word” (“*zakonnoe slovo*”) and the “real” (“*natural'nyi*”) object. The former seems defined by convention: “what we've always called” it; the latter is defined more by nature: the literal meaning of *natural'nyi* is ‘natural’. Importantly, this is also ‘natural’ in the sense of unmediated sensation; the word *natural'nyi* is repeated here after previously being used a few lines earlier to express the hero's *felt* confirmation that the lemonade was actually vodka: “the real thing” (“*samaia natural'naia*”).⁶⁷ This disjuncture between the social word and experienced reality builds on that subtle distancing of word from sensation noted in the previous paragraph; moreover, it will be recalled that this theme is also echoed in both the ‘The Living Corpse’ and ‘Lady's Grief’ which, in their different ways, played on the melancholic aporia lying between subjective experience and objective discourse. However, the hero accepts with cheerfully comic indifference the gap between ‘natural’ object and ‘legitimate’ word, instantly abandoning his attempt at temperance: ‘Bring me,’ I said, ‘one for the road.’⁶⁸

This is an extremely funny story, and it is also a very clever social satire. The satirical rationale becomes clearer when it is realised that the elusive lemonade which the hero seeks is partly a cultural reference to the Bolshevik experiment with prohibition which finally came to an end in 1925, the year before the story was written. Stephen White has noted that in practice this official ban was porous at best, and that throughout the period in which the sale of alcohol was outlawed it was

⁶⁶ «-Так что это у нас завсегда лимонадом зовется. Вполне законное слово. Еще с прежних времен... А натурального лимонаду, извиняюсь, не держим – потребителя нету.» 1:363

⁶⁷ 1:363.

⁶⁸ «Неси, говорю, еще последнюю.» 1:363.

usually attainable by asking for “lemonade” with a knowing “wink”.⁶⁹ This explains why the canteen staff insisted on calling vodka ‘lemonade’, and thus provides the cultural context for the comic substitution that the story relies on. Importantly, by 1926 the state vodka monopoly had been restored and, although alcohol consumption continued to be officially discouraged, alcoholic drinks could be legally purchased. Thus the prohibition-era subterfuge that the story depends on is also a comic anachronism; this is implied in the waiter’s suggestion that the “legitimate” use of the word lemonade for vodka happened “even in times gone by”. Thus the satire functions to show that however the legal framework may change, social conventions and individual behaviours remain completely unreformed. The satirical point, then, is that the fight against alcoholism is won or lost at the level of culture, and not at the level of policy-making.

This satirical interpretation, rooted in contemporary social concerns, is completely self-sufficient in the sense that the story can be read and enjoyed on this basis alone. However, the lemonade of the title also opens up another, supplementary interpretation of the story which is important for understanding melancholia in Zoshchenko’s works of the twenties. The hero’s failure to find lemonade in an environment that offers only alcohol is a perfect inversion of Chekhov’s metaphoric suggestion of the absence of alcohol in the ‘lemonade’ literature of his time. This famous metaphor appears in a letter written to Alexei Suvorin on 25th November 1892 and the stimulus for it seems to have been Suvorin’s reaction to Chekhov’s melancholy tale ‘Ward No.6’ (*Palata No.6*, 1892). The missing literary intoxicant which Chekhov notes, that “certain something” whose absence he senses all around

⁶⁹ S White, *Russia Goes Dry: Alcohol, State and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.17. The same source contains a useful historical overview of the various Soviet anti-alcohol campaigns and the culture of alcohol consumption in this period (see pp.15-25).

him, is neither talent nor technique, but belief.⁷⁰ In reading works by writers of 'alcoholic' literature, Chekhov suggests that "you feel not with your mind, but with your whole being, that they have some kind of purpose."⁷¹ It is this sense of conviction that he sees as missing in his literary generation: "We have neither immediate nor distant goals, our souls are empty spaces."⁷² Finding something akin to pathology in this dearth of belief, Chekhov argues that it is calamitous for art:

He who wants nothing, hopes for nothing and is afraid of nothing cannot be an artist. Whether an illness or not - the point is not in the name - one must admit that our situation is extremely difficult.⁷³

Chekhov's metaphoric coupling of alcohol with belief, and conversely lemonade with lack of it, is essentially discursive; it is about faith and unbelief in art, and particularly in literature. Thus, the intertextual effect of Zoshchenko's allusion to Chekhov's metaphor is precisely to mandate reflection on the alcoholic surfeit in 'Lemonade' in discursive, as well as in purely literal terms. Thus, Zoshchenko's hero not only fails in his struggle to free himself from dependence on intoxicating liquor, he also fails to break free from intoxicating words. Once this connection has been made, certain details of the story suddenly flash in a new, more melancholy way. The comic gap between the "real" ("*natural'nyi*") object and the "legitimate" ("*zakonnoe*") word suddenly acquires a more melancholic cast when its existential breadth is widened by the Chekhovian allusion. A cheerful alcoholic stoically failing to give up the drink when unable to find a non-alcoholic alternative on sale is funny because the reader

⁷⁰ «У нас нет "чего-то"»; A P Chekhov, Letter to A S Suvorin of 25.11.1892 in A P Chekhov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v tridtsati tomakh: pis'ma v dvenadtsati tomakh* (Moscow: Nauka, 1974-1983), Pis'ma, vol. 5, p. 132.

⁷¹ «Вы чувствуете не умом, а всем своим существом, что у них есть какая-то цель». Ibid, pp. 132-133.

⁷² «У нас нет ни ближайших, ни отдаленных целей, и в нашей душе хоть шаром покати.» Ibid, pp. 132-133.

⁷³ «Кто ничего не хочет, ни на что не надеется и ничего не боится, тот не может быть художником. Болезнь это или нет -- дело не в названии, но сознаться надо, что положение наше хуже губернаторского.» Ibid, p. 133.

knows he was ultimately defeated by his own lack of willpower; however, there is at once something much less funny about someone unable to find a non-intoxicating, agnostic space in language, because language is central to the human condition: it is thus not a case of willpower, for the only alternative to language is the wordlessness of melancholia.

It is important to note that 'Lemonade' is not an obviously melancholy story: laughter predominates and the narrator's indefatigable optimism and robust passion for life keep sadness at bay, at least at the first reading. If there is a latent melancholy note, it is in the hero's summing up of the experience at the close of the story:

So I didn't give up. The desire was strong; only circumstances prevented me. As they say: life dictates its own rules; you have to submit.⁷⁴

This stoical acceptance of thwarted desire in the face of life's "rules" (*"zakony"*) partakes in the aporetic play between the socially "legitimate word" (*"zakonnoe slovo"*) and the experience of the "real" (*"natural'nyi"*) object already noted above. However, it only really crystallizes into a simulacrum of melancholic prostration when read in terms of the appropriated Chekhovian metaphor. The melancholia in this story is thus akin to a noonday shadow: it is invisible until you lift your feet, and although it disappears when your foot is replaced, you now know it is there. This is perhaps more typical of the melancholia in Zoshchenko's comic fiction of the twenties.

The Spectacle of Selfhood

The appropriation of Chekhov's lemonade metaphor in the last story suggested a dimension of melancholic alienation comprehensible in terms of faith and unbelief.

⁷⁴ «Так и не бросил. А желание было горячее. Только вот обстоятельства помешали. Как говорится – жизнь диктует свои законы. Надо подчиняться.» 1:363.

Belief, in the widest (not simply religious) sense, is perhaps the hardest faculty for the melancholic to master, something implicit in Kristeva's depiction of the melancholic as "a radical, sullen atheist".⁷⁵ Yet, as the story 'Lemonade' seems to imply, the early Soviet-era was an age in which belief was an increasingly pervasive phenomenon; it was also a time in which agnostic discourses, increasingly laced with the alcohol of conviction, were becoming as elusive as the eponymous soft drink in Zoshchenko's story. With this in mind, it is hardly surprising that themes of faith and unbelief are addressed in other Zoshchenko works from this period. The story 'A Confession' ('Isproved', 1924) is a case in point. It explores this theme in the form of an anti-religious satire which interrogates notions of faith and reason with a breadth of philosophical ambition that exceeds its immediate satirical focus and in the process posits a melancholia residing in exclusion from a community founded on belief. The story opens with an intense, if not exactly solemn, scene of personal devotion in which the heroine Fekla carefully places her twenty-kopek votive candle in front of the image of a saint, before making Easter confession:

For a long time, Fekla painstakingly manoeuvred the candle closer to the image. When her adjustments were complete, she took several steps away, and, admiring her handiwork, began to pray and beg for all the concessions and mercies her twenty kopeks could buy. Fekla prayed a long time, mumbling all her small requests to herself; then, having pressed her forehead against the dirty stone floor, she went to confession sighing and groaning.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ *Black Sun*, p.5. In common with much poststructuralist theory, Kristeva uses theological terms such as "atheist" to refer more broadly to any metaphysical conviction, sacred or profane. This is of course in part a polemical strategy to distance her thought from what is perceived as a bankrupt Western metaphysical tradition, but it also usefully emphasizes the often unacknowledged faith that underpins participation in all social and ideological discourses, not the least of which is language itself.

⁷⁶ «Фекла долго и старательно прилаживала свечку поближе к образу. А когда приладила, отошла несколько поодаль и, любуясь на дело своих рук, принялась молиться и просить себе всяких льгот и милостей взамен истраченного двугривенного. Фекла долго молилась, бормоча себе под нос всякие свои мелкие просьбишки, потом, стукнув лбом о грязный каменный пол, вздыхая и кряхтя, пошла к исповеди.» 'Isproved', 1:237-238.

Fekla's devotions continue as she waits in the queue outside the confessional where "again she began to hurriedly cross herself and mumble."⁷⁷ Despite her pious fervour, however, Fekla cannot help but notice the speed with which people are passing through the confessional: "The confessors were going in there and after a minute they would come out sighing, quietly clearing their throats and bowing to the saints."⁷⁸

The reasons for this brisk penitential turn-around soon become obvious as Fekla herself enters the confessional. Asking the nature of her sin, the priest, without waiting for Fekla's answer, prompts her by suggesting some likely sins, chief among which are doubt and unbelief. Fekla anxiously affirms her own belief but lets slip an admission of her son's atheism. The priest roundly turns on this, challenging the notion of a godless world with all the anger of the righteous:

And where does all this around us come from; whence the planets, stars and moon if there is no God? Your son said nothing of this; where does all this come from? Chemistry I suppose?⁷⁹

The priest's defence is robust enough to reduce Fekla to a desperately blinking affirmation, but it is in fact quite telling in itself. It rehearses the age-old theological argument for the existence of God as an un-caused cause and yet it also contains in itself the seeds of scientific doubt, a doubt that is very quickly confirmed:

"But maybe it is just chemistry," the priest said pensively. "Of course mother, maybe there is no God and it is all chemistry ..."⁸⁰

Thus in a sparkling comic reversal, the priest finds himself confessing to his shocked parishioner in his own confessional; the sins he tried to prompt in the formal

⁷⁷ «[...] снова принялась мелко креститься и бормотать.» 1:238.

⁷⁸ «Исповедники входили туда и через минуту, вздыхая и тихонько откашливаясь, выходили, кланяясь угодникам.» 1:238.

⁷⁹ «А откуда все сие окружающее? Откуда планеты, звезды и луна, если бога-то нет? Сын-то ничего такого не говорил – откуда, дескать, все сие окружающее? Не химия ли это?» 1:238.

⁸⁰ « - А может, и химия, - задумчиво сказал поп. - Может, matka, конечно, и бога нету – химия все ...» 1:238.

penitent turn out to be his precisely his own. This role reversal, which is reinforced by the erstwhile spiritual father referring to his erstwhile penitent as “mother”, plays on the fact that, like the English ‘confessor’, the Russian’ *‘ispovednik’* can refer to both priest and penitent. Crucially though, the reversed roles and the priest’s desperate absence of faith have minimal effect on the unfolding ritual. As she leaves the confessional:

Fekla glanced in fear once more at the priest and left, sighing and coughing meekly. Then she went up to the image of her saint, looked at the candle, straightened the burnt-out wick and left the church.⁸¹

Fekla tends the symbol of her faith unshaken by the recent revelation of priestly unbelief. Moreover, in her “sighing and coughing” (*pokashlivaia*) she echoes the “sighing” and “clearing of throats” (*otkashlivaia*) of the confessors ahead of her in the queue. When the similarity of the penitents’ behaviour on leaving the confessional is taken together with Fekla’s earlier observation of the fast-moving queue, the reader begins to realize that the priest was probably stumbling into confessions of personal doubt with every previous penitent, and is no doubt set to do the same with subsequent ones as well. Furthermore, those other penitents, who continue “bowing to the saints” as they leave the confessional, presumably find their faith no more shaken by clerical doubt than Fekla does.

The abiding impression created by this is of a bankrupt, habit-bound ritual founded on the most grotesque bad faith. This is of course the kernel of the anti-religious polemic that the story stages. However, ‘A Confession’ simultaneously points beyond this immediate satirical purpose, or, more accurately, uses the officially-discredited belief system that is its satirical subject as a means of

⁸¹ «Фекла еще раз испуганно огланулась на попа и вышла, вздыхая и смиренно покашливая. Потом подошла к своему угоднику, посмотрела на свечку, поправила обгоревший фитиль и вышла из церкви.» 1:239.

interrogating themes of faith and reason in far broader terms. What is fascinating in this regard is the way that Fekla's (and the other penitents') faith seems impervious to reasoned doubt, even when that doubt is backed by the ecclesiastical authority invested in the figure of the priest. Their faith is something definitively not based in the realm of reason and words; it is important to note here all the raw physicality by which faith is depicted in the story: Fekla's coughing and groaning; sighing and mumbling; shuffling and absent-mindedly (almost involuntarily) crossing herself. Thus in the story, faith is depicted as something subconscious and bodily, even elemental. This blind, bodily conviction makes the voiced doubts of the priest seem thin, bloodless, and uncertain, something confirmed by the failure of his pallid words to dent the convictions of the faithful.

In terms of the primary satirical purpose of the piece, the depiction of faith as bodily, wordless and beyond the reach of conscious thought locates the final redoubt of religious belief in the subconscious habits of the faithful and not in ecclesiastical power structures; in an echo of the satirical moral of 'Lemonade', the story thus suggests that official campaigns are to be won or lost at the level of culture and individual behaviour rather than of political (or ecclesiastical) superstructure. However, as suggested earlier, the conception of faith in the story as wordless, bodily and beyond the reach of reason has philosophical implications which simultaneously point beyond the immediate satirical focus. In this regard it is important to reflect on the title of the story; in addition to the ambivalence it evokes between priest and penitent, it also recalls Tolstoy's famous reflection on faith, reason, meaning and death in *A Confession* (*Isповed'*, 1879). One of the central philosophical concerns of this work of Tolstoy's is the aporetic relation of faith and reason: reason being unable to ground itself without a moment of faith, and faith being untestable without recourse

to reason.⁸² Thus the allusion to this work serves both to emphasize the philosophical seriousness of Zoshchenko's story as well as to reinforce the aporetic distinction between felt faith and articulate reason that lies at the heart of the piece.

However, the Tolstoyan intertext is also important in bringing the melancholia in Zoshchenko's story to the surface. Whatever else it is, *A Confession* is an earnest spiritual autobiography characterised by the most unsparing psychological introspection; as suggested earlier in this study, its description of a suicidal, spiritual prostration originating in a crisis of faith in reason, society, and even life itself is readily conceivable in terms of melancholia. This melancholic aspect of Tolstoy's work functions intertextually to reinforce an interpretation of Zoshchenko's story in similarly melancholic terms. In Zoshchenko's story, the melancholia can be located in the disturbing image of the faithless priest going through the motions of faith, his lack of personal belief alienating him from the community of the faithful around him and from the entire symbolic system that defines his role in the story. Importantly, this symbolic exclusion is such that the priest is as unable to influence (even negatively) the blind ritual that continues to unfold around him as he is unable to articulate his own alienation within it. This sense of symbolic prostration is only deepened by the iteration of his humiliating confession implied in the story; this humiliation without end translates into a profoundly melancholic image whose resonance is far more general than the narrow confines of the immediate satirical purpose it serves. This melancholic alienation is perhaps best expressed by the priest's resigned defeat at the end of Fekla's confession: "'Well go, go,' the priest said mournfully. 'Don't hold up the faithful.'"⁸³ In addition to its obvious comic value as satire, it is at the same time,

⁸² See for example J Love, *Tolstoy: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2008), pp. 119-126.

⁸³ «- Ну иди, иди, - уныло сказал поп. - Не задерживай верующих.» 1:239.

touchingly sad and shot through with an inchoate sense of knowing defeat and utter helplessness.

It is perhaps not too fanciful to sense in the melancholic figure of the priest a faint echo of Zoshchenko's own position as a Soviet satirist whose personal doubts are swamped by the swell of unquestioning public belief. If 'A Confession' is read as, in part at least, Zoshchenko's own oblique confession of his incapacity for blind, bodily faith, then the priest's mournful acceptance of the need not to detain the faithful becomes the artistic rationale for the satirist trapped in melancholic alienation from his own socially-sanctioned role, and indeed from the whole new Soviet way of life. The association of the alienated satirist with the faithless cleric is made much more sustainable by the fact that the melancholy priest comes to constitute the real centre of gravity in the story; despite his remaining nameless throughout and not appearing until almost half-way through the story, it is the priest's confession that arrests the reader's interest, completely eclipsing that of Fekla, the ostensible penitent.⁸⁴ This is largely because the priest is the principal source of comedy in the story; but it is important to note how the performance of personal doubt before an audience of the faithful makes this a very theatrical comedy. The priest's faithlessness seals him in a subjective perspective distinct from that of the believing community that surrounds him, casting him in an impromptu performance of a kind of theatrical spectacle of the alienated self.

The place of theatricality in Zoshchenko's fictional world has been widely acknowledged by Zoshchenko scholars.⁸⁵ Many of these approaches stress the breadth

⁸⁴ The priest does not appear until line 23 out of 59 in the edition of the story used for this study. 1:238.

⁸⁵ See for example Iu K Shcheglov, 'Entsiklopediia nekul'turnosti (Zoshchenko: rasskazy dvadtsatykh godov i "Golubaia kniga")' in A K Zholkovskii and Iu K Shcheglov (eds), *Mir avtora i struktura teksta: Stat'i o russkoi literature* (Tenaflly NJ: Ermitazh, 1986), pp. 59-60; C Popkin, *The Pragmatics of Insignificance: Chekhov, Zoshchenko, Gogol* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp 76-81; A K Zholkovskii, *Poetika nedoveriia, passim* but especially pp. 132-44 and 271-303 and 'Mikhail

of this theatricality, the way that it exceeds the limits of theatrical settings. Cathy Popkin notes how in Zoshchenko “‘theatrical space’ extends beyond the proscenium and the footlights” and that “even the events that occur outside the theatre proper reflect the theatricality of Soviet life”.⁸⁶ Zholkovsky’s analysis of Zoshchenko’s “theatrical topos” (“*teatral'nyi topos*”) finds a similar theatre of life, emphasizing “the existential removal of the distinctions between art and reality, between stage and life, between aesthetic and practical pretence.”⁸⁷ This means that “for Zoshchenko’s heroes the world is theatre and the theatre is the world.”⁸⁸ What is less commented on, however, is the way in which this extra-theatrical theatricality is dependent on an alienating selfhood. Jenny Kaminer comes close to identifying this basic determinant of Zoshchenko’s theatre of life when she observes how in Zoshchenko’s stories:

[...] the performers remain unaware of the performance value of their actions, and they frequently attempt to prevent the intrusion of the audience into their private sphere. In other words the audience and the performer frequently disagree about the nature of the events in question.⁸⁹

Although Kaminer does not develop this important insight further, it is precisely on the recalcitrant subjectivity which she identifies that the widespread theatricality in Zoshchenko’s stories ultimately depends.⁹⁰ In its detachment from the collective perspective, this alienating selfhood provides the basic dichotomy of viewpoint separating the spectacle from the spectator and the performer from the audience.

Zoshchenko’s Shadow Operas’ in C Kelly and S Lovell (eds) *Russian Literature, Modernism and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 119-146; J Kaminer, ‘Theatrical Motifs and the Drama of Everyday Life in the 1920s Stories of Mikhail Zoshchenko’, *The Russian Review*, 65, July 2006, pp. 470-490.

⁸⁶ C Popkin, *Pragmatics of Insignificance*, p. 79.

⁸⁷ «[...] экзистенциальное снятие различий между искусством и реальностью, сценой и жизнью, притворством эстетическим и практическим.» А К Zholkovskii, *Poetika nedoveriia*, p. 281.

⁸⁸ «Для зощенковских героев мир – театр и театр – мир.» Ibid, p281.

⁸⁹ J. Kaminer, ‘Theatrical Motifs’, p. 482.

⁹⁰ Kaminer’s study adopts a primary focus on “audience reception rather than the intentions of the performer.” This tends to preclude further interrogation of the subjective position of the “performer” and, by extension, to preclude a more existential understanding of the theatricality in the stories. Ibid, p. 482.

This theatrical dichotomy of subjective and social perspectives is an important aspect of Zoshchenko's art of textual truancy; it is readily identifiable across a huge number of stories as a key element of the writer's trademark comic *skandal*. In story after story the personal perspective of the hero is brought into embarrassing and mutually-uncomprehending collision with the anonymous figure of the social other. This frequently takes the form of the faceless voice of authority: one thinks of the indifference of all those anonymous cashiers, shopkeepers, conductors and cloakroom attendants, or indeed of all those stories which, as Lesley Milne notes, end up in the police station or courthouse.⁹¹ The theatricality of such clashes is affirmed with comic irony in the famous tale 'The Bathhouse' when both the hero and the nameless attendant repeatedly insist that: "This isn't a theatre."⁹² However, it can just as often take the form of an actual 'audience' such as the crowd of curious housewives in 'Lady's Grief', the queue of penitents in 'A Confession', or the comic chorus of "experts" ("*eksperty*") whose anonymous adjudication provides theatrical amplification of the hero's embarrassing argument with the manager of the buffet in the well-known story 'The Aristocrat' ('*Aristokratka*', 1923).⁹³ This disjuncture between subjective and social perspectives is of course primarily a comic device and as such elicits laughter; however, as has been seen in 'Lady's Grief' and 'A Confession', its evocation of alienated selfhood can simultaneously resonate with a profound melancholy.

The melancholia in this disjuncture becomes much more visible from behind the laughter in those stories where the protagonists begin to recognize, even if only vaguely, the gap between their social role and their experience of selfhood. When the faithless priest in 'A Confession' continues to act out his spiritual role so as to "not

⁹¹ L Milne, *Zoshchenko and the Ilf-Petrov Partnership*, p.28.

⁹² «*He в театре.*» 'Bania', 1:279.

⁹³ 'Aristokratka', 1:172.

hold up the faithful”, it implies some awareness of the gulf of meaning that separates self from other. This sense of knowing prostration makes the priest a more sympathetic character, and at once more tragic. In ‘The Actor’ (‘Akter’, 1925) the protagonists also have an understanding of their theatrical disempowerment; although in this story this knowledge derives from their being actual protagonists in a theatrical production. The story’s basic comic conceit is that of an actor playing the victim of a robbery who, under the cover of the script, is actually robbed during the performance by the actors playing the robbers. It is a story of tragicomic desperation in which the helpless actor-victim cannot escape the bounds of his theatrical role in order to prevent his being robbed. The hero’s desperate attempts to dissuade the actor-robbers, both verbally and physically, are repeatedly thwarted by the script, which keeps bringing the assailants back for further attempts: “The course of the play makes them keep on piling in.”⁹⁴ The bleeding wound of one of the actor-robbers becomes part of the theatrical effect; even the hero’s direct appeals to the audience become subsumed in the spectacle and are greeted with rapturous applause from the auditorium and eager encouragement from the director backstage.⁹⁵ The hero gradually realises that: “shouting doesn’t help; whatever you shout all fits in with the course of the play.”⁹⁶ It is only when the hero falls to his knees and addresses the director by name that the “theatrical specialists” (“*teatral'nye spetsy*”), noting only his departure from the script, begin to realise what has happened and lower the curtain.⁹⁷

The story is simultaneously comic and sinister; the theatrical mechanism robs the hero of his actual experience of robbery and transmutes this into its own dramatic spectacle. Theatre is depicted in the story as a clumsy mediation of real life which

⁹⁴ «А те по ходу пьесы это насаждают и насаждают.» 'Akter', 1:270.

⁹⁵ 1:270

⁹⁶ «[К]рики не помогают. Потому, чего ни крикнешь – все прямо по ходу пьесы ложится.» 1:270.

⁹⁷ 1:270.

actually denatures the experience of reality for the audience rather than making it more vivid. This has fuelled readings of the story as an anti-theatrical satire mocking the Stanislavsky method in particular and the political significance accorded to theatre in the early Soviet era in general.⁹⁸ It is interesting to note in this regard that the play staged in the story is called *Who is to Blame?* (*Kto vinovat?*). This is presumably a stage adaptation of Herzen's 1846 novel of that name; however, as Zholkovsky notes, the robbery scene in the play has absolutely no basis in Herzen's novel.⁹⁹ Thus, in addition to appropriating and denaturing the personal experience of the actors, the theatre is also shown in the story appropriating and denaturing its very literary origins.

The play in the story exhibits a glorious theatrical unprofessionalism that is attributable to its amateur production and staging deep in the southern provinces. As Iurii Shcheglov points out, the "performance" of the play "is ruined because all of its participants break theatrical convention".¹⁰⁰ In fact, the production is pure comic chaos with drunken actors, last minute understudies, laughably inadequate costumes and a rowdy audience; in this regard Shcheglov particularly emphasizes both the extra-theatrical dialogue between the hero on stage and his friends in the audience, as well as the actor-robbers' personal pursuit of criminal gain during the performance.¹⁰¹ As pure theatrical satire, the story works very well, with its account of the chaos that reigns both on stage and in the audience, and the comically shoddy stagecraft.

However, the flawed theatricality of the play, in addition to its intrinsic comic value, functions to focus attention simultaneously on a more profound theatricality of subjective perspective which is not limited to the details of the story's theatrical setting. This extra-theatrical theatricality becomes clearer when the hero of 'The

⁹⁸ Iu Shcheglov, 'Entsiklopediia nekul'turnosti', p.60; J Kaminer, 'Theatrical Motifs', p. 478.

⁹⁹ A K Zholkovsky, *Poetika nedoveriia*, p.330.

¹⁰⁰ «Спектакль срывается, потому что все его участники нарушают театральную условность»; Iu Shcheglov, 'Entsiklopediia nekul'turnosti', p.60.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, p.60.

Actor' is compared with the priest from 'A Confession'. Although the latter is alienated from the collective, 'audience', perspective by unbelief and the former by theatrical convention, the two protagonists find themselves in positions of symbolic disempowerment that are to some extent similar. What is common in both these cases is the way that the characters' roles in a larger public performance neutralize their capacity for self-expression and vitiate their ability to influence the symbolic reality around them. Despite committing the gravest ecclesiastical *faux pas* in the confessional, the priest in 'A Confession' has no meaningful effect on the ritualised faith that surrounds him and which continues to define his role. In the case of the hero of 'The Actor', his words become pallid and ineffectual ("shouting doesn't help") as he finds himself unable to inscribe his personal reality into a social script which, for the duration of the performance, defines him utterly and refracts his subjective experience through the prism of its own perspective, fundamentally altering its meaning in the process. In other words, both protagonists find themselves caught in the theatre of the alienated self.

There are of course limits to the comparison: most notably, where the symbolic alienation resulted in something akin to melancholia in the case of the priest, this is definitively not the case with the hero of 'The Actor'. For all his desperation and even physical injury during the performance, he evinces nothing of the prostration and defeat of the priest in 'A Confession'. It is important to note in this regard that while the priest's story is told for him by an anonymous narrator, the hero of 'The Actor' retains narrative voice for himself; that the priest is narrated rather than being allowed to narrate bespeaks a greater sense of symbolic disempowerment than is suggested by the actor-victim's lively *skaz* narration. His experience makes the hero of 'The Actor' very wary of the stage; thus, at the end of the story he sums up his

view of the theatre: "You say it's an art? Tell me about it! I've done it!"¹⁰² This suggests that the hero will avoid treading the boards again, which is already less than the helpless defeat of the priest; in fact it is something more like 'once bitten, twice shy'. Given this acquired mistrust of theatricals, the terrifying powerlessness of hero's situation also remains limited to the duration of the performance described in the story. It will be recalled that a key element of the melancholic situation of the priest was its open-endedness.

In fact the sense of symbolic disempowerment in 'The Actor' is only lengthened into the shadow of melancholia in the person of the hero's predecessor in the role of victim. In the story, the hero is actually a last minute understudy for an actor who was too drunk to perform. As the hero describes it:

Just before the performance itself this one amateur, who was playing the role of the merchant, got drunk. He was in such a state, the bum, that we could see he couldn't carry off the role of the merchant. When he went up to the footlights he was purposely crushing the bulbs with his foot.¹⁰³

There is an implicit melancholy in this image: the broken actor, perhaps recalling Zoshchenko's own cancellation of readings because he 'so terribly didn't want to appear', retreats into himself, trying to efface his public role by extinguishing the lights. Importantly, the reader is given no indication at this point in the story as to the reason for the original actor's eccentric and destructive behaviour; it is only when his understudy, the hero, has related his experience of violent, 'theatrical' loss that the reader is left to link the experience of the two protagonists and infer the reasons for the original actor's melancholic withdrawal. Once these connections are made then the story's melancholia becomes much more visible and other details acquire a more

¹⁰² «Вы говорите – искусство? Знаем! Играли!» 1:270.

¹⁰³ «А перед самым спектаклем один любитель, который купца играл, выпил. И в жаре до того его, бродягу, растрясло, что, видим, не может роль купца вести. И, как выйдет к рампе, так нарочно электрические лампочки ногой давит.» 1:269.

melancholy cast. That the original actor is too drunk to perform is thus particularly interesting in view of the allegorical similarities identified between melancholia and alcoholism earlier in this chapter.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, in contradistinction to the hero who understudies him, the original actor presumably has to endure the desperate ordeal that the hero describes for every night of the run. He thus faces a similarly iterative prostration to that of the priest in 'A Confession': a depressing cycle of defeat and powerlessness which reinforces the melancholy hopelessness of the situation.

Melancholy Laughter

The melancholia that emerges from within the texture of all the stories analyzed in this chapter resides ultimately in the clash of social and subjective perception; it is manifested in the disparity between the intoxicating promise of linguistic self-realisation and the actual distance of language from the experience of embodied selfhood. The realisation of this pallor of words constitutes a kind of loss of faith in the possibility of genuine self-identification in language and is thus a profound form of social alienation. It is a melancholia that is by necessity wordless, revealing itself in the gaps created by a wide variety of textual disjuncture: hermeneutic discordance, intertextual interstice, allegorical parallel, and the collision of subjective and collective points of view. It can be felt as a hidden presence behind a variety of overt satirical themes: alcoholism, persisting religious belief and theatrical satire. Of course,

¹⁰⁴ In fact the coupling of alcohol and theatre is not uncommon in Zoshchenko's comic fiction. In 'Strong Medicine' ('Sil'noe sredstvo', 1925), the alcohol loving hero is persuaded to go to the theatre every Sunday to distract him from drink. However, while he quickly becomes the "foremost theatre-goer in the district" («первым театралом в районе стал» 1:325), he finds that the theatre can fit perfectly into his current dissolute lifestyle: "He gave up drinking on Sundays; started drinking on Saturdays; and moved the bathhouse to Thursday." («Пить бросил по воскресеньям. По субботам стал пить. А баню перенес на четверг.» 1:325) Also interesting in this light are the story 'Cultural Delights' ('Prelesti kul'tury', 1926) and the *feuilleton* 'A Dangerous Playlet' ('Opasnaia p'eska', 1925): in the former, the hero is persuaded to go to the theatre by two friends he encounters while shopping for something "to wet his whistle" («горло промочить» 1:358); in the latter the actors use a drinking scene as a pretext to drink so much "that by the end of the second act all the artists were completely smashed" ([...] что к концу второго действия все артисты были пьяны вдребезги» 1:483).

this list does not offer an exhaustive guide to the sources of melancholia in Zoshchenko's comic fiction; neither does the presence of any of those themes listed necessarily offer a guarantee that a given story will strike the reader as particularly melancholic.

In fact, the textual origins of melancholia in Zoshchenko's comic fiction that are explored in this chapter are all widely recurrent aspects of the writer's comic aesthetic; occasionally they translate into a powerful sense of melancholic prostration, but more frequently they remain a troubling presence in a laughter whose dominance precludes the perception of sadness in any depth. In other words they constitute a sort of latent melancholia which can be felt by the reader to a greater or lesser degree depending on the story. This of course raises the question of what precisely determines the relative balance of comedy and melancholy in any given story. It is perhaps helpful at this point to recall the situation in 'The Actor' analyzed above. The reader of this story is offered two possible perspectives which in turn correspond to two possible planes of identification: the subjective view of the actor which corresponds to sympathy with the hero's plight; and the collective view of the audience which corresponds to the implicit rejection of his recalcitrant subjectivity. As suggested above, the view-point of the actor is dense with melancholic potential, while the audience, by contrast, is immune to this, being subsumed in the enjoyment of the violent spectacle. The reader is implicitly asked to choose between laughing with the audience and sharing the suffering of the actor. Crucially, it is only because the reader of 'The Actor' inclines more toward identification with the actor-victim that the melancholy in the story can come to the surface.

If melancholia reveals itself to the reader in sympathetic identification with the suffering protagonist, then it is important to note, as Henri Bergson does, that laughter

in its purest sense displaces the very compassion needed to sense this melancholy. For Bergson laughter is a sort of “social gesture” which arises in response to any human inelasticity that impedes adaptation to the labile demands of social existence.¹⁰⁵ Bergsonian laughter is thus a social lubricant the “natural environment” of which “is society” and whose “function [...] is a social one”; it thus equates with that plane of identification by the reader which rejects recalcitrant subjectivity.¹⁰⁶ In other words, the social function of laughter urges the reader towards the perspective of the bloodthirsty audience in ‘The Actor’ at the expense of the perspective of the actor himself. In this it is by necessity pitiless, and “demands something like a momentary anaesthesia of the heart.”¹⁰⁷ The presence or absence of sympathy can thus change the whole perception of a situation:

Try, for a moment, to become interested in everything that is being said and done; act in imagination, with those who act, and feel with those who feel; in a word, give your sympathy its widest expansion: as though at the touch of a fairy wand you will see the flimsiest objects assume importance, and a gloomy hue spread over everything. Now step aside, look upon life as a disinterested spectator: many a drama will turn into a comedy.¹⁰⁸

This is an interesting exercise to try with a Zoshchenko story. If one tries reading one of the classic comic stories, say ‘The Bathhouse’, whilst artificially giving one’s “sympathy” for the hero “its widest expansion”, the resultant sense of tragedy can often be quite heart-rending and the latent melancholia become much more visible.

Zoshchenko’s humour is really an ambivalent mixture of sympathy and pure, social laughter; the degree to which the reader’s sympathy for the protagonist prevails over the Bergsonian *risus purus* determines the prominence of melancholia in a

¹⁰⁵ H Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, translated by C Brereton and F Rothwell (København & Los Angeles: Green Integer, 1999 [1900]), pp. 23-24.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

particular Zoshchenko story. The sympathy of the reader is of course to a large degree subjective and not completely subordinate to textual direction; a melancholic cast of mind must surely make a reader more receptive to the latent melancholia in a given story. Nonetheless, some protagonists definitively invite more sympathy from the reader than others; this explains why stories that are thematically comparable are not necessarily equally melancholic. For instance, the melancholic priest in 'A Confession' bears some comparison with the priest in 'An Easter Incident' ('Paskhal'nyi sluchai', 1925) in as far as both are faced by the spectre of retreating faith.¹⁰⁹ However, in the latter case this takes the form of a mid-liturgical argument over a refund from the collection plate for an Easter cake that was stood on while being blessed; here the extreme bathos and the abundance of physical humour, perhaps the purest *risus purus*, precludes any real sympathy with the figure of the powerless and humiliated cleric.¹¹⁰ In the case of 'A Regrettable Incident' ('Priskorbnyi sluchai', 1926), the drunkard hero struggles with the disparity between cultural discourse and the totality of his bodily existence in a way that suggests the melancholic pallor of words. However, the fact that the regrettable incident of the title was the hero's having vomited in a cinema whilst trying to watch a film in a state of inebriation makes his position grotesque and unsympathetic in the extreme, consequently the latent melancholia in the story goes largely unnoticed.¹¹¹

This degree of grotesque is actually quite uncommon in Zoshchenko; far more typical of his comic technique is a more balanced ambivalence between sympathy and corrective, social laughter, even in those stories where the sadness is not sufficiently

¹⁰⁹ The validity of the comparison is perhaps strengthened by the fact that the two stories were to some extent written as companion pieces. Jeremy Hicks notes that both 'A Confession' and 'An Easter Incident' (the latter bearing the title 'An Empty Ritual' ('Pustiakovyi obriad')) first appeared together in the Easter 1924 issue of *Krasnyi voron*. See J Hicks, *Poetics of Skaz*, p. 143.

¹¹⁰ 'Paskhal'nyi sluchai', 1:282.

¹¹¹ 'Priskorbnyi sluchai', 1:348.

felt to be called melancholic: the typical Zoshchenko hero can no more be entirely condemned than he can be completely exonerated. The ambivalence of Zoshchenko's humour has of course been noted by other scholars, most particularly Jeremy Hicks who sees it as part of a broader hermeneutic indeterminacy which, for him, remains the cardinal aesthetic virtue of the comic fiction.¹¹² However, there is perhaps a sense in which the bifurcated appeal to laughter and melancholy in the stories lends Zoshchenko's ambivalent humour a more normative nature than Hicks supposes. The interaction of mocking laughter and melancholic sympathy in Zoshchenko's humour makes for a subtle existential satire which, although related to it, functions separately from the more obvious social satire. Central to the function of this existential satire is its very split nature: sympathy with the latent melancholia in many of the stories softens the harshness of the laughter and brings the fundamental disjuncture between embodied selfhood and the social other to the surface; the laughter simultaneously stresses the social dimension of being and prevents sympathy for the protagonist becoming excessive and lending a heroic cast to melancholic isolation. The bifurcated thrust of this satire of the human condition thus simultaneously warns against the twin dangers of social withdrawal and of exaggerating the social dimensions of being. Melancholia, whether latent or manifest, is a vital component of this existential satire; without acknowledging and understanding Zoshchenko's melancholia our grasp of Zoshchenko's laughter is all the more hollow.

The nature of this existential satire and its dependence on textual melancholia, whether latent or manifest, is important to note because it is precisely this that accounts for Zoshchenko's continuing relevance for the twenty-first century reader. As the Soviet experience slips further and further into the margins of living memory,

¹¹² J Hicks, *Poetics of Skaz*, pp. 147-168.

critical models based on socio-cultural satire (from whatever political perspective) become less and less able to explain the continuing laughter that Zoshchenko's stories elicit. The contemporary critic cannot ignore the fact that Zoshchenko's comic writing remains a surprisingly marketable commodity in today's very different cultural marketplace. Igor' Sukhikh has given some anecdotal indication of this popularity in a radio interview broadcast in 2008 accompanying the publication of the eight-volume collected works under his editorship; he related his and the publisher's surprise and delight at the fact that half the entire print run of this edition was sold in the ten days immediately following publication; this is a sales volume which he suggests is virtually unheard of for a literary classic in the contemporary Russian book market.¹¹³ Thus, despite descending into the double-edged, literary category of 'classic' (something Zoshchenko may well have abhorred), Zoshchenko's comic fiction nonetheless continues to speak to a contemporary audience. This obvious interest in Zoshchenko today cannot be accounted for simply by historical curiosity, or even by Soviet nostalgia; it urges critics to pay greater attention to the timeless aspects of Zoshchenko's art and inevitably draws them to listen more intently to those textual lacunae that so fascinated Mandelstam; it urges them to strain their ears to catch the melancholic tenor that often resides within.

¹¹³ See the interview with Sukhikh which was included as part of the programme '*Knizhnaya kuchnia*' broadcast by *Radio Ekho Moskvy, Sankt-Peterburg* on 01 November 2008, transcript available online at <http://www.echomsk.spb.ru/content/prog/default.asp?shmode=3&idprog=855&ida=79170> (Accessed on 31/05/2010).

Chapter 3

Vicissitudes of the Written Self

The preceding chapter outlined a melancholic presence in Zoshchenko's work of the twenties, which, although frequently oblique, distanced and seldom articulated as such, nonetheless occupies a textual centrality far in excess of its surface prominence. It suggested a melancholia residing in the textual absences that are so characteristic of Zoshchenko's writing; it is thus both accessible through the textual resources of the stories themselves and plays an active part of the poetic effects they achieve. The current chapter will likewise posit a melancholia dwelling in textual truancy; however, where the previous chapter concerned itself with a melancholia that was a self-contained textual phenomenon, the current chapter will posit something of a far more meta-textual nature: it will explore the melancholia residing in the ambivalent assertion and effacement of the writer's written self that recurs again and again in Zoshchenko's works of the twenties. Importantly, this is a melancholia that would not have been obvious to the vast majority of contemporary readers because its visibility is largely dependent on extra-textual resources, in particular the retrospective reading of the stories in the light of the later revelations contained in *Before Sunrise*. Following the important example of Alexander Zholkovsky, the current chapter will attempt to demonstrate how the dense web of resonance between the stories of the twenties, the later autobiographical reminiscences in *Before Sunrise* and independently verifiable biographical resources reveal an intensely personal written self retrospectively identifiable in the fiction of the twenties. This substantial personal element in the writing is not obvious in itself and is indeed hidden by various strategies of textual estrangement; nonetheless, it ultimately persists, resisting complete effacement in the otherness of the finished work. In this it can be seen as a

profound, enactment in text of a melancholic self repeatedly trying, but failing, to lose itself in the otherness of language.

The nature of this aporetic written self is suggested fictionally in the early story 'The Writer' ('Pisatel', 1923). The hero of the tale is a clerk (*kontorshchik*) called Nikolai Drovishkin who "has long dreamed of becoming a newspaper correspondent."¹ With this in mind he writes to the newspaper *Red Miracle* (*Krasnoe chudo*) asking to be accepted as a worker correspondent (*rabkor*); he is duly taken on and instructed by the editors: "Write about everyday life!"² Enthused by his commission and eager to get writing, the hero can barely wait for the end of the working day; however, before he can cut his teeth on some real journalism he runs into a problem: "What exactly am I going to write about?"³ This issue quickly becomes more vexing as the hero searches desperately for inspiration in the unremarkable street scene before him:

So about what? About everyday life... There, for example... Well what? Well over there, for example, a policeman's standing... Why's he standing? Maybe he's baking in the sun and has no protection over his head... Hmmmm, no; it's too trivial...⁴

Perhaps unsurprisingly given his commission to write about the everyday, triviality of theme becomes an increasingly intractable obstacle to the hero's attempts at writing. Seeing flies in the window of a shop selling sausages, the hero toys with writing an exposé on this theme; however, having picked up half a pound of tea sausage, he decides against the topic because "it's trivial" ("*melko*").⁵ Searching for a "substantial" subject, "some sort of social phenomenon" or "significant fact" to write

¹ «[Д]авно мечтал сделаться корреспондентом.» 'Pisatel', 1:155.

² «Пишите о быте.» 1:156.

³ «О чем же я буду писать?» 1:156.

⁴ «Как о чем? О быте... Вот, например... Ну что бы? Ну вот, например, милиционер стоит... Почему он стоит? Может, его солнце печет, а сверху никакой крыши нету... Гм, нет, это мелко...» 1:156.

⁵ 1:156.

about, the hero sees only triviality everywhere.⁶ The passers-by around him seem to be “most ordinary” (“*samye obyknovennye*”);⁷ the hero even “despairingly” considers writing “about the weather” or “about the priest”.⁸

Significantly, the reason he opts not to write about the priest is that the cleric in question is distantly related to his wife; taken together with the hero’s acquisition of the sausage this represents the gradual intrusion of personal concerns into his writing project. However, it is precisely this personal interest, regardless of how apparently trivial, which ultimately allows him to overcome his block. This becomes clear from the finished article which he reads to his wife after holing himself up in his room to write through the night. The hero’s wife is generally impressed; although it began “obscurely” and “its sense was even unclear to Drovishkin himself”, the article ended with the following “trenchant” polemic against drying washing hung out on the street:⁹

And instead of seeing nature’s landscape from their windows, at times workers behold before their eyes damp washing that has been hung out to dry. One does not have to go far for an example. As recently as today, having returned from work, I saw the aforementioned washing, amongst which were both ladies’ things and gentlemen’s smalls that, of course, do not meet the aesthetic needs of the soul. It is time to put an end to this. What was usual under the old regime must not be so now.¹⁰

This finely-done parody of Soviet polemical journalism is a real gem of comic writing; the style is completely authentic, only the dripping smalls puncture the

⁶ «Нужно взять что-нибудь этакое крупное. Какое-нибудь общественное явление. Факт значительный.» 1:156.

⁷ 1:156.

⁸ «О погоде, что ли, написать? – уныло подумал он. – Или про попа, что ли...» 1:156.

⁹ «Статья началась туманно, и смысл ее даже самому Дровишкину был неясен, но зато конец был хлесткий:» 1:157.

¹⁰ «И вместо того, чтобы видеть перед окнами ландшафт природы, трудящиеся порой лицезреют перед глазами мокрое белье, которое повешено для просушки. За примером ходить недалеко. Не далее как сегодня, вернувшись после трудового дня, я увидел вышеуказанное белье, среди которого были и дамские принадлежности, и мужское исподнее, что, конечно, не отвечает эстетическим запросам души. Пора положить этому предел. То, что при старом режиме было обычным явлением, того не должно быть теперь.» 1:157.

general tone of studied self-righteousness with a gentle bathos. However, the star comic turn is saved until the end of the story when the hero's wife, impressed as she is with the article, points out that the wet washing which the hero so eloquently railed against was in actual fact his own: "Your smalls were there as well."¹¹ Thus, the personal concerns of the hero unintentionally surface in his writing with a comic vengeance.

This is a fictional depiction of precisely that writing out of one's "own rubbish" ("*sobstvennaia drian*") which Zholkovsky (echoing Gogol) argues is the hallmark of Zoshchenko's aesthetic practice.¹² What is particularly interesting though is the pain this causes the hero, who reacts to this revelation with prostrate desperation: "Drovishkin sank down before his wife and, with his face buried in her lap, quietly began to cry."¹³ His anxious despair seems to derive from the fact that he feels this recalcitrant personal aspect to his writing prohibits him addressing "some sort of social phenomenon" and thus detracts from his general qualification to write for the public: "It seems I have everything: both a fine style and talent, and still I can't do it... How do people write?"¹⁴ The irony, of course, is that it does not affect the quality of the actual writing in the slightest; without the realization, on the part of either reader or writer, that the hero is unconsciously satirizing his "own rubbish", this personal subtext completely disappears from view. However, once the realization is made, the written self emerges instantly as if written in magic ink.

¹¹ «Там и твое исподнее.» 1:157.

¹² А. К. Зholkovskii, *Poetika nedoveriia*, p.16.

¹³ «Дровишкин опустился перед женой и, уткнувшись носом в ее колени, тихонько заплакал.» 1:157.

¹⁴ «Кажется, все у меня есть: и слог красивый, и талант, а вот не могу... И как это пишут люди?» 1:157.

Textual Contours of a Written Self

The sense in which the meta-fictional musings in 'The Writer' hold true for Zoshchenko's own literary practice are hinted at in the parody autobiography 'On Myself, Ideology and Some Other Stuff as Well' ('O sebe, ob idelogii i eshche koe o chem', 1922). Importantly, this playful, autobiographical fragment has limited biographical value in and of itself; indeed its relevance in this respect has been characterised by Gregory Carleton as "an extreme case of recalcitrancy".¹⁵ Yet, however much it subverts the demands of orthodox literary biography, 'On Myself' does casually offer some important biographical guidance by referring to a then work-in-progress: "At the moment I'm writing *Notes of a Former Officer*; it's not about me, of course, but it'll all be there."¹⁶ More interesting than the insight into this particular work (which was never completed in any case) is the suggestion of autobiographical content inhering in ostensibly non-autobiographical work. This is of course part of the irony implicit in this parody of autobiographical writing: Zoshchenko re-directs the genuine biographical interest of the reader away from the frustratingly elusive autobiographical exercise that is 'On Myself' to the fictional works themselves; in so doing he crafts an extremely subtle satire of a form whose assumptions of unproblematic self-knowledge were totally alien to the epistemology underlying his whole artistic enterprise. However, it is the implicit suggestion of a substantial investment of self in ostensibly non-autobiographical fiction that is important for the purposes of this study. A sense of the nature and extent of this written self can be gleaned by looking closely at the fiction in the light of autobiographical sources, chief among which is *Before Sunrise*.

¹⁵ G Carleton, *The Politics of Reception*, p.28.

¹⁶ «Нынче я пишу «Записки бывшего офицера», не о себе, конечно, но там все будет». 'O sebe, ob idelogii i eshche koe o chem', in М М Zoshchenko, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 8 volumes ed. I Sukhikh (Moscow: Vremia, 2008), volume entitled *Raznotyk*, p.103.

The early story 'Love' ('Liubov', 1922) offers a useful starting point for just such an exercise.¹⁷ The tale begins with the return of the hero Grisha Lovets to Petrograd enriched and triumphant from an undefined, but prolonged absence; the hero discovers that while away he has been presumed dead by friends and family and a requiem mass has even been read *in absentia*.¹⁸ Yet the fact of his presumed death seems not to trouble Grisha who "grinned" ("*usmekhnulsia*") when told of it; it certainly does not stop him from seeking pleasure and distraction in the city.¹⁹ After two weeks of such distraction Grisha finds himself in a cabaret in the port district of the city in the company of a young woman who is strikingly "similar in personality to a certain someone special" called Natal'ia Nikanorovna.²⁰ However, before it is clear to the reader whether this is in fact his "someone special" or just someone like her, the loudly-voiced political views of a nearby sailor intrude on Grisha's conversation. The sailor, having voiced his despair of politics and proclaiming "I am ready to live, but politics has devoured my youth", is accused by Grisha of "White Guardism" ("*belogvardeishchina*") and roundly set upon.²¹ At this point other sailors get involved and Grisha is forced to retire from both the brawl and the establishment much the worse for wear, leaving his conversation with the young woman unfinished. Nonetheless, now that he has remembered his love for Natal'ia he cannot stop thinking about her as his thoughts turn inexorably to marriage. Complications soon arise when it transpires that while he was away Natal'ia married a long-moustachioed

¹⁷ It is important to note that Zoshchenko wrote two different stories entitled 'Love': the early story analysed here and the more famous story published in 1924. The latter story will be analysed later in this chapter where the significance of such brazen recycling of previously used titles (something by no means common in Zoshchenko's work of the twenties) will be discussed further.

¹⁸ М М Zoshchenko, 'Liubov', 1:81.

¹⁹ 1:81.

²⁰ «[...] личностью похожа на одну любимую особочку»; 1:83.

²¹ «Мне жить охота, а политика заела мою молодость.» 1:83.

engineer. Nevertheless, Grisha resolves to write to his beloved declaring his love, before letting her decide for herself.

After a tearful weighing-up of alternatives, which Grisha does not witness, Natal'ia finally decides to leave her husband for the roguish hero.²² Insisting that she has not chosen Grisha for his money she leaves the real cause of her amorous defection unspoken, telling Grisha that: "There is a reason of sorts, but you won't understand."²³ Reason or no, however, there remains the obstacle of Natal'ia's husband. Importantly, he is never named in the story, characterised and referred to only by his long moustache which he plays with nervously as he confronts his absconding spouse and her lover. Blocking their exit, he threatens to kill himself on the count of five unless his wife stays, but when he falters at the penultimate number Natal'ia bursts out laughing and pushes past him to run away with Grisha. After a peculiarly sombre wedding where the usually lively Cracovienne becomes "a serious dance" ("*ser'eznyi tanets*"), the accompanying accordion plays "joylessly" ("*neveselo*") and Grisha succumbs to a jealous rage when a red-haired student makes eyes at the bride, the runaway couple prepare to leave Petrograd.²⁴ Meanwhile, the long-moustachioed engineer is waiting for them at the station; seemingly unsure himself why he is there he decides that: "It's not through romanticism that I'll take a look [at Natal'ia and Grisha], not with the eye of love, so to speak ... ha ha, but from afar, through a great curiosity."²⁵ This attitude of detachment quickly translates into a vividly imagined exchange between Natal'ia and himself which, in its emotional depth, completely overshadows the awkward and stilted exchange that actually takes place when Natal'ia arrives. For in spite of the verbose sentimental speechifying he

²² 1:85.

²³ «Причина такая есть, да не понять вам.» 1:86.

²⁴ 1:87-88.

²⁵ «Не из романтизма взгляну, не глазом, так сказать, любви ... хе-хе, а издали, из великого любопытства.» 1:89.

envisaged, the engineer can only silently follow Natal'ia and Grisha along the platform and watch them enter the train.²⁶ He “despondently” (“*unylo*”) thinks about throwing himself under the wheels of the train, but in the end cannot do it and so, in what will become a typical Zoshchenko ending, he “quietly dragged himself off towards the exit.”²⁷

The story is thus, as its title suggests, about love in all its inscrutability, unpredictability and stubborn resistance to social convention. Both this depiction of the radical nature of love and the surname of the hero (Lovets – fisher or catcher) carry a faint echo of Evgenii Zamiatin's satire on bourgeois social mores in his novella *The Fisher of Men* (*Lovets chelovekov*). This work, written while Zamiatin was in England but not published until his return to Russia after the Revolution, explores the ineffable anti-conventionality of love through the satirical figure of an evangelical moralist who supplements his income by catching, preaching to, and then blackmailing couples indulging in amorous dalliances in wartime London. Although not published until 1922, Zoshchenko's ‘Love’ was in fact written some time in the winter or spring of 1921, shortly after the formation of the Serapion Brotherhood and at the height of Zamiatin's influence on the aspiring writer through his role as a tutor at the Petrograd House of Arts.²⁸

However, beyond these thematic echoes of Zamiatin's tale, there is a distinctly Zoshchenko theme of thought and action as represented in the characters of the engineer and Grisha respectively. Importantly, Grisha does not win Natal'ia's hand because he understands love any better than the engineer; in fact, at the point at which he wins Natal'ia's consent the narrator opines: “Oh, Grisha knows little of a woman's

²⁶ 1:89-90.

²⁷ «[П]оплелся тихонько к выходу.» 1:90.

²⁸ See ‘Khronologicheskaiia kanva’, p. 343.

heart!”²⁹ Rather Grisha prevails in love because he does something rather than think about it, or, in the words of the proverb that his name echoes: “the game goes to the catcher.”³⁰ Thus, as Grisha runs through the streets to claim his inamorata the narrator draws out the lesson, noting approvingly that: “It’s bad to think on the move.”³¹ The importance of this lesson becomes clear when juxtaposed against the example of the long-moustachioed engineer who, in his final bid to win back his wife at the station, spends more than two-thirds of the relevant passage picturing the scene for himself before failing dismally to do anything when he had the chance. Ironically, at the end of his imagined confrontation the engineer states majestically that “a man stands by his deed”,³² not realising that in the one deed he proposed, namely his threatened suicide, he failed to carry it through proving it to be the hollow gesture that Natal’ia suspected it was. Understood in this way, the clash between Grisha and the engineer really prefigures the clash between the thinking, sentimental *intelligent* and the roguish, vulgar man of action that runs right through Zoshchenko’s oeuvre and finds its apogee in his *Sentimental Tales* and *Youth Restored*.

What is not immediately obvious in all this, however, is the extent to which Zoshchenko has written himself into this story. This is something that only becomes visible when the story is read alongside the autobiographical aspects of *Before Sunrise* and other extra-textual biographical details. In particular, the theme of the triumphant returnee finding his beloved married clearly recalls Zoshchenko’s experience with his first love, the woman that Tomashevskii identifies as Nadezhda Rusanova-Zamyslovskaiia. Tomashevskii notes that they met in 1911 in what, for Zoshchenko,

²⁹ «Ох, плохо знает Гриша женское сердце!» 1:85.

³⁰ «На ловца и зверь бежит.»

³¹ «На ходу думать плохо.» 1:85.

³² «[Ч]еловек по делу стоит.» 1:89.

was “the dawn of a first love which left its mark for many years.”³³ Moreover, he also relates how Zoshchenko returned from the front in 1916, newly-decorated with the Order of St Anna, to find his beloved unexpectedly married.³⁴ The parallels with the newly-enriched Grisha returning to find Natal’ia wed in his absence are obvious; even the initials of the two women are the same. What is more interesting still is the way this bare biographical schema is fleshed out in *Before Sunrise*, where Nadia Rusanova-Zamyslovskaiia becomes Nadia V, an embellishment that reveals distinct parallels with aspects of the story ‘Love’.

In the episode in *Before Sunrise* entitled ‘A Rendezvous’ (‘Svidanie’), the two meet as sixteen year old gymnasium students at the monument to the Steregushchii on Petersburg’s Kamenoostrovskii Prospekt. Although no date is given for the events described, Zoshchenko being sixteen would place them in 1910 or 1911, which ties closely with Tomashevskii’s dating of the start of the romance. That the monument to the Steregushchii is their chosen meeting place is important. This monument is a rather graphic depiction in bronze of the moment when a Russian warship was scuttled by her last two surviving crew members to prevent its capture by the Japanese at Tsushima. In line with the symbolic logic of *Before Sunrise*, this naval monument used as a lovers meeting place combines both watery and amorous defeat in accordance with the very personal neurotic patterns that torment the narrator of *Before Sunrise*, something which tells in the narrator’s peculiarly rapt fascination with the “two sailors by an open Kingston valve” as “bronze water pours into the hold” of the doomed ship.³⁵ Importantly, the amorous and naval last stands recalled in this vignette

³³ «Начало переживаний первой любви, оставившей след на долгие годы.» ‘Khronologicheskaiia kanva’, p. 340.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 341.

³⁵ «Два матроса у открытого кингстона. Бронзовая вода льется в трюм.»; *Pered voskhodom solntsa*, 3:464. These neurotic patterns link all the autobiographical vignettes that compose the first half of *Before Sunrise* and are ultimately condensed into a complex of symbolic fears in the second part of

also find a muted parallel in the earlier story 'Love'. It will be recalled how in that story Grisha's re-acquaintance with his lost love was disturbed by a brawl involving sailors which the narrator describes as an "obscene event" ("*pokhabnyi sluchai*") where "a sailor was beaten for counterrevolution."³⁶ Written in 1921, such a reference could hardly avoid evoking memories of the Kronstadt uprising which was viciously put down in March of that year. The reference to this doomed last stand by sailors of the Baltic fleet is surely strengthened by Grisha accusing the sailor of "White Guardism". Arguably, it is only this personal authorial reference which rescues the scene with the sailor in the story 'Love' from seeming just a little gratuitous.

The story of Nadia V continues in the episode entitled 'I Love' ('*Ia liubliu*') which describes Zoshchenko's return to Petrograd on leave from the front to discover Nadia engaged to be married. Sitting again at the monument to the Steregushchii, Nadia declares tearfully: "How stupid. Because you did not write at all; because you left so unexpectedly; a whole year has gone by and I am getting married."³⁷ Nonetheless, she affirms her continuing love for Zoshchenko and contemplates breaking the engagement, only hesitating at the thought that rings have already been exchanged, the engagement announced and a gift made to her of an estate. Asking to think about it, she promises Zoshchenko an answer after two days, thus replicating the anguished, private soul-searching that Natal'ia conducts out of sight of Grisha. However, after seeing Nadia and her betrothed together the next day Zoshchenko sends a fallacious note claiming he has been recalled to the front. Zoshchenko describes this last action thus: "This was the most stupid and senseless action of my

the work. This outline will suffice for the current chapter, but this complex subject will be discussed in appropriate depth in the final chapter.

³⁶ «[П]обили матроса за контрреволюцию.» 1:83.

³⁷ «Как глупо. Зачем вы мне ничего не писали. Зачем уехали так неожиданно. Ведь прошел год. Я выхожу замуж.» *Pered voskhodom solntsa*, 3:482.

life. I really loved her, and this love has not passed since that time.”³⁸ Here Zoshchenko gives the clearest indication of the personal significance of this experience. It is also interesting that Zoshchenko draws attention to the gap between thought and deed in his dealings with Nadia V. As with the long-moustachioed engineer in ‘Love’, Zoshchenko here makes a fatuous romantic gesture that runs contrary to his true feelings and results in an action which he himself acknowledges as senseless and stupid. The contrast with Grisha here is striking: where Grisha honestly declares his love in a well-timed letter, Zoshchenko first fails to write when it would have been expedient to do so and then writes a letter that is completely at variance with his real desire.

The composition of ‘Love’ dates from the very start of Zoshchenko’s literary career, at a time when the novice writer was still attending Kornei Chukovskii’s studio at the Petrograd House of Arts. It is perhaps unsurprising to find such a liberal deployment of autobiographical motifs in such an early piece. However, the textual echoes of the Rusanova-Zamyslovskaja story identified above cannot be so easily dismissed; they are not at all limited to this story, or indeed to the early period of Zoshchenko’s literary career. Ol’ga Shilina finds a direct reference to the Rusanova-Zamyslovskaja romance in the narrator’s description of his own youthful infatuation in the tale ‘Of What the Nightingale Sang’ (‘O chem pel solovei’, 1926).³⁹ In arguing with the opinion of “learned and party people” (“*uchenye i partiinye liudi*”) who deny the existence of love, the narrator reluctantly draws on his own amorous experience as proof:

³⁸ «Это был самый глупый и бестолковый поступок в моей жизни. Я ее очень любил. И эта любовь не прошла до сих пор.» 3:482.

³⁹ O Iu Shilina, “... Eto - zhelanie liubit'. Vas”. Pis'ma M. Zoshchenko k N. Rusanovoi-Zamyslovskoi (1915-1917)' in N A Groznova and V P Muromskii (eds) *Mikhail Zoshchenko: Materialy k tvorcheskoi biografii* (St Petersburg: Nauka, 1997-2002), Vol. 3, p.95.

The author does not wish to confess before the casual reader and he does not wish to open his intimate life to some critics who are particularly unpleasant to him, but all the same, looking into it, the author recalls one maid from the days of his youth. Such a silly little white face she had, dear little hands, such pitiful little shoulders. But the author fell into such foolish raptures! The author lived through such tender minutes when, from a surfeit of every possible noble feeling, he fell to his knees and, like a fool, he kissed the very earth.⁴⁰

The reason that Shilina suggests for equating this “maid” with Rusanova-Zamyslovskaja is primarily chronological: the narrator asserts in the next line that “now [...] fifteen years have passed” (“*teper' [...] proshlo piatnadtsat' let*”) since the occurrence of these events;⁴¹ given the publication of the work in 1926, this would make the narrator’s recollection stretch back to 1911, the year in which Tomashevskii dates the beginning of the Rusanova-Zamyslovskaja romance. To these temporal observations might be added that the assertion, although significantly stylized, is still couched in what purports to be some kind of direct authorial voice: it invites, to some degree at least, equation with the experience of the writer himself.⁴²

However, as the story ‘Love’ showed, there is perhaps more to be gained by looking for such connections in terms of theme rather than direct reference; the tale ‘Apollon and Tamara’ (‘Apollon i Tamara’, 1923) is particularly illustrative in this regard.⁴³ It relates the story of the troubled love between Tamara Omel’chenko and

⁴⁰ «Автор не хочет исповедоваться перед случайным читателем и не хочет некоторым, особо неприятным автору критикам открывать своей интимной жизни, но все же, разбираясь в ней, автор вспоминает одну девицу в дни своей юности. Этакое было у ней глупое белое личико, ручки, жалкие плечики. А в какой телячий восторг впадал автор! Какие чувствительные минуты переживал автор, когда от избытка всевозможных благородных чувств падал на колени и, как дурак, целовал землю.» *Sentimental'nye povesti*, 2:107.

⁴¹ 2:107.

⁴² The unstable combination of parody and sincerity in this authorial voice, a key feature of so many of Zoshchenko’s longer tales, is discussed in depth in the next chapter; at this point it will suffice to say that for all their comic inflection, authorial intrusions of this nature frequently retain a confessional element, albeit one that should not be read too mechanically.

⁴³ This long tale (*povest'*) was originally published in 1923 in a collection of stories in the émigré press, but, along with ‘O chem. pel solovei’ and five other longer tales, was subsequently collected in Zoshchenko’s *Sentimental Tales* (*Sentimental'nye povesti*) of 1927. See Iu Tomashevskii, ‘Primechaniia’, 2:472. The genesis and dynamics of this important collection are discussed in more depth in the next chapter.

Apollon Perepenchuk, the latter a “free artist” (“*svobodnyi artist*”) and “ballroom pianist” (“*taper*”) whose dreamy waltzes and fantasias are much in demand on the entertainment circuit of the nameless provincial town in which the story is set.⁴⁴ The two meet at a ball where Apollon is playing and which takes place “at the start of the European World War”.⁴⁵ Their love blossoms and Apollon eventually proposes marriage in a gesture whose romantic affectedness tells in his being “dressed in a morning coat with a bouquet of oleanders and a box of boiled sweets”.⁴⁶ However, his bid is unsuccessful; Tamara turns him down because of his uncertain prospects: “she did not want to risk it, she was afraid of poverty and a life without material provision”.⁴⁷ Fate also intervenes at this point in the form of Apollon’s conscription into the army; “in December 1916” (“*v dekabre shestnadtsatogo goda*”) the lovers part tearfully and Apollon “declared triumphantly that he would either not return at all, or he would return as a man celebrated and renowned.”⁴⁸

However, war and the Revolution change everything. In the wake of the social upheaval Apollon is almost completely forgotten; as a musician he has been supplanted in the cultural life of the town by a string ensemble, whose popularity is assured by their more contemporary repertoire and familiarity with “transatlantic dances” (“*zaatlanticheskie tantsy*”).⁴⁹ He is even gradually forgotten by Tamara and his only living relative, a maiden aunt; in fact his aunt, having presumed his death, even sells his old wardrobe. Yet the unexpected anonymity that greets Apollon on his discharge from the army is only partly due to socio-cultural change; importantly, Apollon himself has “changed drastically” (“*strashno peremenilsia*”): “It seemed that

⁴⁴ *Sentimental'nye povesti*, 2:30.

⁴⁵ «[...] в начале европейской всемирной войны.» 2:35.

⁴⁶ «[...] одетый в жакет, с букетом олеандров и с коробкой постного сахара»; 2:36.

⁴⁷ «Она не хотела рисковать, она боялась бедности и необеспеченной жизни»; 2:36.

⁴⁸ «Аполлон Перепенчук торжественно сказал, что он или совсем не вернется, или вернется прославленным, знаменитым человеком.» 2:37.

⁴⁹ 2:38.

this was a different man.”⁵⁰ Moreover, it turns out that, in common with Grisha Lovets from ‘Love’ and the narrator of *Before Sunrise*, he made little effort to keep in touch while he was away; in particular: “He did not write letters to anyone.”⁵¹

Apollon himself seems unaware of how much everything has changed and, despite his failure to live up to his vow to return famous from the war, he remains anxious to rekindle his relationship with Tamara. Yet, on seeing her there is at once an obvious distance: “He stared hard and piercingly into her eyes, trying to penetrate her thoughts, to understand; but he understood nothing.”⁵² Tamara is equally unable to find an empathy extending beyond Apollon’s external appearance: “Tamara looked at him, but did not understand anything, did not see anything; she saw only his grimy face, his tangled hair and his torn soldier’s tunic.”⁵³ An unbridgeable emotional divide seems to have opened between the two lovers; this is clear at once to Tamara who rejects Apollon a second time, declaring, perhaps a little disingenuously: “I hope you did not take my innocent, girlish prattle at face value.”⁵⁴ This rejection both hints at the romantic superficiality of their love and also subtly points to the material self-interest lurking behind Tamara’s feelings: the figurative phrase ‘to take at face value’ (*‘priniat’ za chistuiu monetu*) literally means ‘to take for a clean coin’. Tamara’s refusal is then reinforced several days later in a letter:

With an affectation of feminine coquettishness, she wrote in a sad, lyrical tone of the fact that she was now going to marry a certain foreign businessman called Globa and that, in taking this step, she

⁵⁰ «Казалось, что это был другой человек.» 2:39.

⁵¹ «Он писем никому не писал.» 2:39.

⁵² «Он смотрел пристально, пронзительно в ее глаза, пытаясь проникнуть в ее думы, понять. Но ничего не понял.» 2:40.

⁵³ «Тамара смотрела на него, но ничего не понимала и ничего не видела, она видела лишь загрязненное его лицо, свалющиеся волосы и рваную гимнастерку.» 2:40.

⁵⁴ «Надеюсь, вы не приняли мой невинный девичий лепет за чистую монету.» 2:40.

did not want to leave nasty memories of herself in the mind of Apollon Perepenchuk.⁵⁵

The thematic similarities between this and the Rusanova-Zamyslovskaja/Nadia V episodes analyzed earlier are manifold. Both describe imagined, triumphant returns which are painfully belied by reality; both articulate this theme in terms of a naïve, youthful romance disrupted by war and revolution. Both likewise depict amorous defeat to more socially prestigious rivals: Tamara forsakes Apollon to marry a foreign businessman; Nadia forsakes Zoshchenko to marry into the landed gentry, even receiving an estate as a wedding gift. There is also some degree of correlation with the dates: it will be recalled that the tipping point in Apollon and Tamara's relationship came with the first rejection and Apollon's joining the army in 1916; this is the same year that Rusanova-Zamyslovskaja married, thus marking a comparable tipping point in her relationship with Zoshchenko.⁵⁶ Even the fact that Tamara's husband is a foreigner seems to chime with aspects of the Rusanova-Zamyslovskaja story. The narrator of *Before Sunrise* describes returning to Petrograd from Arkhangelsk to discover that Nadia V had left the city with her whole family (including her husband and a newly-born child Zoshchenko was not aware of) and gone over "to the Whites" ("k belym").⁵⁷ In a later episode we learn that Nadia V ended up in emigration in Paris nursing a rejection of her homeland so total that now "she hates everything left in Russia."⁵⁸ Thus Nadia V's marriage, maternity and exile render her at once profoundly foreign while still being an inseparable part of Zoshchenko's private self; this sense of the self made foreign is echoed poetically in

⁵⁵ «Она с жеманностью кокетливой женщины писала в грустном, лирическом тоне о том, что нынче она выходит замуж за некоего иностранного комерсанта Глобу и что, делая этот шаг, она не хочет оставить о себе дурных воспоминаний в памяти Аполлона Перепенчука.» 2:43.

⁵⁶ See O Shilina, "... Eto - zhelanie liubit'. Vas'", p.96.

⁵⁷ 3:491. No date is given for this episode in *Before Sunrise*, but Tomashevskii shows that Zoshchenko received permission to return to Petrograd from Arkhangelsk on 31 March 1918; see 'Khronologicheskaja kanva', p.342.

⁵⁸ «Она ненавидит все, что осталось в России.» 3:516-517.

Tamara's marriage to a foreigner and the comic, foreign-sounding name she acquires: 'Globa'.

In common with both the Rusanova-Zamyslovskaja episodes and the story 'Love' analyzed earlier, the plot of 'Apollon and Tamara' depends on a chronic failure to keep in touch; specifically, the absence of timely and emotionally honest letter-writing is crucial to both stories as well as being reflected in the Rusanova-Zamyslovskaja/Nadia V vignettes. Importantly, in all of these instances, this concrete inter-subjective failure coalesces into a broader meditation on the nature of love itself, something perhaps most obvious in 'Apollon and Tamara'. Both the main characters in this story are obviously linked by a mutual love; Apollon's overweening devotion is all too obvious, but even the comparably level-headed Tamara can still cry in private over Apollon's photograph despite having rejected him twice.⁵⁹ The problem is that neither is particularly adept at reading the love of the other, and, perhaps more importantly, neither can articulate their love in a way that transcends the gulf of selfhood; it is for this reason that the romantic gestures of the couple stand out as being so cloyingly sentimental, whether that is the affected tone of Tamara's letter of rejection or Apollon's proposal while comically dressed in morning coat, clutching gaudy flowers and sugary confections. What both experience is a love more narcissistic than self-transcending, something implicit in Tamara's unwillingness to sacrifice material well-being for a sentiment that must strike her as comparatively insubstantial. The predominance of narcissism in their love also tells in the way they each handle the final rejection. By referring to her earlier infatuation as "innocent, girlish prattle", Tamara perhaps implies that it is as much her lost girlish innocence that she loves as Apollon himself; in fact there may well be a sense in which Apollon

⁵⁹ 2:45.

perhaps stands only as a reminder of a vanished youth. This sense of the lover as psychological stand-in is made much clearer in the case of Apollon; in the line immediately following Tamara's rejection of him for the second and final time:

Apollon Perepenchuk returned home, and at home it suddenly dawned on him that nothing could now return his former life to him and that his former life was laughable and naïve. Also laughable and naïve was his desire to become a great musician and a man renowned and celebrated. He also understood further that for the whole of his life he had not lived in the way that was needed, neither in what he had done nor in what he had said ... but as to how he needed to have lived, even now he did not know.⁶⁰

What is immediately striking about this passage is the complete absence of images of Tamara in Apollon's *post mortem* dissection of the affair; in fact Apollon's love seems to be closely tied up with a more generalized sense of self, or, more precisely, it seems to be tied up with a more idealized sense of self. It is interesting to note how the concrete failure of his love for Tamara (being twice rebuffed) quickly translates into a more broad-based collision of subjective ideals with the experience of reality. This surely recalls the mechanism of Freudian melancholia outlined in the first chapter of this study; it will be recalled that, in the Freudian schema, the melancholic ego suffers before the demands of static, self-made, narcissistic ideals that are irreconcilable with the dynamic realities of lived existence. This melancholic subtext becomes much clearer when one considers Apollon's increasingly melancholic behaviour in the wake of Tamara's final rejection of him: "now he lay in bed for whole days at a time"⁶¹; he is increasingly given to bleak reflections on the bestial meaninglessness of life and "felt that his game was lost and that life calmly carried on

⁶⁰ «Аполлон Перепенчук вернулся домой, и дома вдруг понял, что ничто теперь не в состоянии вернуть ему прежней жизни и что прежняя жизнь смешна и наивна. И смешно и наивно было его желание стать великим музыкантом и знаменитым, прославленным человеком. И еще понял: всю свою жизнь он жил не так, как нужно, не то делал и не то говорил ... Но как было нужно, он и теперь не знал.» 2:40-41.

⁶¹ «Он целыми днями лежал теперь в постели»; 2:41.

without him.”⁶² This melancholia even tells in the music he plays: gone are the dreamy waltzes of his youth; now “in his music it was impossible to trace either motif, or even separate musical notes – it was some kind of horrifying, demonic, animal roar.”⁶³ This unstructured, asymbolic soundscape recalls that “frugal musicality” which Kristeva notes in melancholic speech and that was discussed in chapter one; in its horrifying, animalistic character one perhaps catches something of the instinct and drive-based nature of Kristeva’s semiotic which, detached from symbolic convention, slides into the compelling meaninglessness of melancholia.

Apollon’s behaviour continues to become more and more irrational: wandering around the town at night and without willing it he finds himself outside Tamara’s house; here he is confronted by the heroine but, like the long-moustachioed engineer at the railway station in ‘Love’, he is unable to say anything at all. Running from the scene, Apollon then stumbles into a bizarre, almost involuntary suicide attempt which is only thwarted by the intervention of a passer-by. Towards the end of the story Apollon eventually finds a fragile peace working as a gravedigger in a cemetery named after the Annunciation (“*Blagoveshchenskoe kladbishche*”). Here he finds an unexpected sweetness and warmth in the “freshly dug earth” (“*tol’ko chto vyrytaia zemlia*”), perhaps symbolically finding a firmer grounding in reality. Moreover, if we recall the symbolic associations of melancholia with death and the earth from chapter one, then this same scene becomes indicative of Apollon’s gradual acceptance of death and loss amidst the promise of new life implied in the name of the cemetery.⁶⁴ However, this new-found equilibrium remains extremely brittle: when Apollon sees Tamara and her foreign partner together he immediately reverts to his

⁶² «[О]н чувствует, что его игра проиграна и что жизнь спокойно продолжается без него.» 2:43.

⁶³ «Но в его музыке нельзя было проследить ни мотива, ни даже отдельных музыкальных нот – это был какой-то ужасающий, бесовский рев животного.» 2:41.

⁶⁴ 2:48.

old self; in an echo of both the Rusanova-Zamyslovskaiia episode related earlier and the behaviour of the long-moustachioed engineer from 'Love', Apollon hides and watches the couple "like an animal" ("kak zver") before finally running away.⁶⁵ This event strengthens the pathological cast characterising Apollon's narcissistic love for Tamara; it posits a latent psychological complex at the heart of the hero's love for the heroine that is never finally overcome, and which always threatens to unstitch the libidinal threads that bind him to the world beyond himself.

Many of these themes, including the important association of love and melancholia, find additional reflection in the short story cycle that first marked Zoshchenko out as a comic writer of rare ability: *Stories of Nazar Il'ich, Mr Sinebriukhov* (*Rasskazy Nazara Il'icha gospodina Sinebriukhova*, 1922). The echoes of the Rusanova-Zamyslovskaiia affair mostly cluster around the bewitching figure of the "fair Polish wench" ("prekrasnaia poliachka") Viktoriia Kazimirovna.⁶⁶ In the story which bears her name ('Viktoriia Kazimirovna'), she is introduced as the adoptive daughter of a Polish miller whose village lies between the Russian and German lines during the First World War. The narrator-hero of the cycle, the eponymous Sinebriukhov, falls in love with Viktoriia Kazimirovna who persuades him to help her uncover the hiding place of her father's hidden fortune. When Sinebriukhov's plan accidentally leads to the death of the miller before he could reveal the location of his stash, the "fair Polish wench", now newly impoverished, presents him with an ultimatum:

Now you either fetch me, even if from the depths of the sea, some kind of modest capital, or else, she said, you'll be the worst villain to me and I'll leave, I know where I'll go, to the rear - Ensign

⁶⁵ 2:48.

⁶⁶ *Rasskazy Nazara Il'icha gospodina Sinebriukhova*, 1:28.

Lapushkin has asked me to be his mistress and has even promised me the cutest little gold watch with a bracelet.⁶⁷

What is striking here is the extent to which this rehearses themes already familiar from the foregoing analysis. Importantly, Viktoriia Kazimirovna manifests the same ambivalent combination of love and material self-interest that characterised the heroines in 'Apollon and Tamara' and 'Love', so obviously in the case of the former and more ambiguously with the latter. In addition, if we recall the motif of un- or anti-Soviet, female foreignness identified in 'Apollon and Tamara' and the account of the Rusanova-Zamyslovskaja affair in *Before Sunrise*, then it is also noteworthy that the "fair Polish wench" is both explicitly foreign and, at the very least, implicitly un-Soviet.⁶⁸ Moreover, just as with 'Apollon and Tamara' and the Rusanova-Zamyslovskaja affair, there is the threat from a love rival of higher rank; while we know little of Sinebriukhov's exact place in the military hierarchy, we know for sure that he is definitely not an officer, and that consequently Ensign Lapushkin would be his superior. Importantly, as has been shown earlier, all these themes, the inscrutable mix of love and material self-interest, the foreign woman and the socially superior rival, find some basis in the Rusanova-Zamyslovskaja affair; even the rhetorical invocation of "the depths of the sea" chimes with the image of the sinking ship that is so memorably associated with the Rusanova-Zamyslovskaja affair in *Before Sunrise*.

Sinebriukhov, of course, does not have the money to meet the demands of his beguiling Polish lover; however an opportunity presents itself in the unlikely form of a raid on the German trenches in which Sinebriukhov has to take part. In the course of

⁶⁷ «И теперь достань ты мне хоть с морского дна какой-нибудь небольшой капитал, а иначе, говорит, ты первый для меня преступник, и уйду я, знаю куда, в обоз, - звал меня в любовницы прапорщик Лапушкин и обещал даже золотые часишки с браслеткой.» 1:40.

⁶⁸ The story is set before the revolution, so in this more limited sense the heroine can be considered un-Soviet. However, the story was written less than two years after the end of the bitter Soviet-Polish war in October 1920; arguably in this context, the depiction of a materialistic, opportunistic Pole would invariably lend the character a more actively anti-Soviet coloration in the mind of a contemporary Soviet reader.

the action, the hero is forced to kill a German soldier who was barring his return to the Russian lines; the deed done, Sinebriukhov then calmly robs the corpse of his fallen opponent taking a watch and a wallet full of foreign money. Thus he acquires the “modest capital” he needs in order to maintain himself in his beloved’s affections. Unfortunately, the hero now finds himself separated from his comrades and stranded in no man’s land with no cover but for some long grass. To make matters worse he attracts the attention of a raven (“*voron*”) that has mistaken him for carrion (“*padal*”); thus begins a darkly comic struggle between the hero and the raven; the hero, while anxious to chase off the “filthy bird” (“*ptich'ia nechist*”), nonetheless has to be mindful of attracting the attention of nearby German soldiers.⁶⁹ In the end Sinebriukhov runs for the Russian line and escapes from both from the field and the raven, but is wounded in the process. However, once he has recovered he finds that the money he took from the dead German has disappeared and, although he is decorated for his part in the action, he loses Viktoriia Kazimirovna to Ensign Lapushkin. Zoshchenko himself was, of course wounded in the field; moreover, it will be remembered from the account of the Rusanova-Zamyslovskaja affair in *Before Sunrise* that Zoshchenko too returned wounded and decorated for valour in the field to find himself forsaken in love in favour of a more prestigious rival.

It is worth returning to Sinebriukhov’s macabre struggle with the raven for it is perhaps the most arresting image in the whole story. It recalls Pushkin’s folkloric poem ‘One raven to another flies ...’ (‘*Voron k voronu letit...*’ 1828), in which two ravens resolve to feast upon a newly slain knight (“*bogatyř*”) lying beaten on the field. The poem ends with the tragic image of the knight’s mistress: “His mistress

⁶⁹ 1:43.

waits for her true love| Not one slain, but one who lives.”⁷⁰ The inevitable switching of the lady’s affections that is so discreetly suggested by Pushkin is rendered in earthier and more cynical tones in the original Scottish Border ballad of which Pushkin’s poem is a loose verse translation: in this original version, one raven says to the other with ghoulish delight: “His lady’s ta’en another mate,| So we may mak our dinner sweet.”⁷¹ Thus, the image, albeit refracted tragically in the case of Sinebriukhov, is profoundly melancholic in its suggestion of a fallen soldier fighting for life and love, threatened always with being ultimately forsaken in death.

The melancholy in this image is only intensified by the way in which the demonic persistence of Sinebriukhov’s raven also recalls the explicitly melancholy, Plutonian prophet from Edgar Allan Poe’s famous poem ‘The Raven’ (1845).⁷² Interestingly in this regard, the narrator of Poe’s poem twice addresses the bird thus: “‘Prophet!’ said I, ‘thing of evil! – prophet still, if bird or devil!’”⁷³ This demonological coloration is echoed in Sinebriukhov’s reference to his feathered tormentor as a “filthy bird” (“*ptich'ia nechist*”): *nechist*’ describes the unclean in both a literal and a spiritual sense, in the latter mode denoting an evil spirit. Importantly, Sinebriukhov’s raven “sat right down on [his] chest” to peck and beat at him.⁷⁴ Poe’s raven is felt as a similarly thoracic phenomenon: Poe describes the raven as a “fowl

⁷⁰ «А хозяйка ждет милого,| Не убытого, живого.» ‘Voron k voronu letit...’ in A S Pushkin, *Sobranie sochinenii v voc'mi tomakh* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literature, 1967-1970), T3, p.72.

⁷¹ ‘Twa Corbies’ in W Scott, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border: Consisting of Historical and Romantic Ballads Collected in the Southern Counties of Scotland With a Few of More Modern Date Founded Upon Local Tradition* (London: G G Harrap, 1931).

⁷² The reference is not as improbable as may appear at first glance. Poe was extremely influential on Russian literature of the Silver Age, due in no small part to the enthusiastic advocacy of Konstantin Bal'mont [see for example A Pyman, *A History of Russian Symbolism* (Cambridge: Cambridge university Press, 1994), p. 80]. Although Zoshchenko achieved literary fame after the revolution, *Before Sunrise* confirms the degree to which he was a mental product of the Silver Age; in fact, *Before Sunrise* also includes a lengthy discussion of Poe’s melancholia (see 3:644-647) in which Zoshchenko describes the American as “a remarkable writer, the influence of whom on the fate of all world literature has been enormous” («замечательный писатель, влияние которого было огромным на судьбу всей мировой литературы.» 3:644.)

⁷³ E A Poe, ‘The Raven’, in *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, edited and introduced by J Gerald Kennedy (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 425.

⁷⁴ «[П]рямо на грудь садится»; 1:43.

whose fiery eyes now burned into my bosom's core;"⁷⁵ he then goes on to admonish the bird in terms of the same metaphor: "Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door!"⁷⁶ Poe's poem is about the impossibility of mourning a love lost in death; it thus amplifies the intertextual effect established above, but it translates this into more explicitly melancholic terms. In respect of the wordlessness of melancholia discussed in the first chapter it is interesting to note how both Zoshchenko's and Poe's birds also present some form of impediment to speech and thought: this is most obvious with Poe's raven who concludes and stifles the narrator's every stanza with a bleakly repetitive "Nevermore"; it is also more obliquely present in the fact that Sinebriukhov's bird "hissed" ("*shipit*") at the hero; *shipet'* means both to hiss and to shush and in this context both meanings pertain.⁷⁷ The big difference of course is that while there is no end to the suffering of Poe's miserable narrator, Sinebriukhov manages to elude his tormenting, melancholic demon by braving enemy fire and leaving it behind on the battlefield. Yet his brush with melancholia remains a powerful image which colours much of the remaining stories in the cycle.

Interestingly, Sinebriukhov's ordeal with the raven of melancholia begins as soon as his thoughts turn to Viktoriia Kazimirovna, in the course the same sentence in fact: "Here I started to think about Viktoriia Kazimirovna, I just looked – from up above a raven was flying down at me."⁷⁸ Viktoriia Kazimirovna, being narratively associated with the raven, thus also becomes symbolically entwined with the melancholia that it represents. In view of her being something of a pathological love object, it is important to note that this is not the first story in the cycle to feature the

⁷⁵ 'The Raven', p. 424.

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 425.

⁷⁷ 1:43.

⁷⁸ «Стал я тут думать про Викторию Казимировну, только смотрю – сверху на меня ворон спускается.» 1:43.

beguiling Pole; she was actually introduced to the reader in the preceding story called 'A High Society Tale' ('Velikosvetskaia istoriia', 1922). Importantly though, at her first appearance she is introduced as the Polish wife of Sinebriukhov's commanding officer: in other words in a context incompatible with her other role as the adoptive daughter of a Polish miller in the story 'Viktoriiia Kazimirovna'. This confusion is referred to explicitly by Sinebriukhov himself, who tries to correct himself, suggesting of 'A High Society Tale' that "there was no fair Polish wench Viktoriia Kazimirovna that time. There was then some other personage, possibly also a Polish wench".⁷⁹ This discrepancy is not only supposed to be noticed, but it is of the utmost importance in understanding the nature and function of Viktoriia Kazimirovna in the stories in which she appears. At one level this deliberate narrative solecism can be interpreted as part of the comically unreliable narration that makes Sinebriukhov's *skaz* narration so compelling. However, there is also a sense in which it makes Viktoriia Kazimirovna seem somehow unreal, or at least more imagined than real. The story itself, and indeed the whole cycle, is refracted through the voice of Sinebriukhov which means that Viktoriia Kazimirovna is not objectified as a character in her own right; the reader only ever sees her through Sinebriukhov's eyes and the image we see of her is a purely narcissistic construct. It is for this reason that the same female image can appear in two mutually-exclusive contexts; it is also for this reason that she becomes so intimately associated with melancholia.

When the three stories analyzed here are read together they come to constitute something of a bleak meditation on the narcissistic ambiguities of love. To some extent, the whole of this dismal, philosophical reflection can be condensed into the comic image of Apollon's morning-coated proposal with sweets and oleanders from

⁷⁹ «[Д]а только не было в тот раз прекрасной полячки Виктории Казимировны. Была тогда другая особа, тоже, может быть, полячка»; 1:38.

the story 'Apollon and Tamara' noted above. This image reveals the two sides of a love whose narcissistic limitations always belie its metaphysical ambitions. On the one hand the fancy clothes, gaudy colours and cloying sweetness suggest a superficial, gestural romanticism equally divorced from psychic and external realities, an empty sentimentalism that was later to become the central satirical theme of Zoshchenko's famous *Sentimental Tales*. On the other hand however, this comic image conceals within itself an altogether darker understanding of love: the sugary sweets and hot house flowers suggest something both nutritionally insubstantial and ill-suited to the harsh exigencies of lived reality; moreover, that oleanders are toxic serves only to underline the psychological poison inhering in the fine-sounding, metaphysical ideal of romantic love. This melancholic philosophy in which love is both hollow sentiment and psychological poison is depressing enough in itself, but what is equally important to note is the extent to which this meditation on the nature of love chimes with what is known about the Rusanova-Zamyslovskaja episode.

Turning again to the account of the Rusanova-Zamyslovskaja/Nadia V romance in *Before Sunrise*, in particular the episode entitled 'A Rendezvous', this notion of love as both empty gesture and psychological poison is readily identifiable. When Nadia V complains of the narrator's brooding silences, he replies, a little sophomorically: "I don't consider it a virtue to say words which tens of thousands of people have uttered before me."⁸⁰ Although his cocksure rejection of the romantic clichés of the multitude is subsequently diluted by his all too bourgeois embarrassment at kissing in public, the narrator nonetheless voices a dissatisfaction with love as hackneyed gesture (verbal or otherwise) and prefers silence in lieu of a more authentic intersubjective exchange. The more metaphysical union that the

⁸⁰ «Я не считаю достоинством говорить слова, которые до меня произносили десятки тысяч людей.» 3:465.

narrator craves is, of course, ultimately chimerical; instead the couple have to make do with yet another cliché: kissing in the dark of a cinema with the evocative name *Molnii* (Lightning).⁸¹ The pathological cast hanging over all of this derives from the way that the confluence of amorous flirtation, water and lightning participates in the larger symbolic economy of *Before Sunrise*; these symbols are ultimately construed to become the neurotic patterns which structure the anxiety and melancholia which the work as a whole attempts to understand.⁸² That the other Rusanova-Zamyslovskaiia/Nadia V episodes are similarly inflected, as indeed are all the vignettes in the first half of *Before Sunrise*, lends a generalised pathological colouring to this whole story of youth and first love.

The narcissistic love analyzed above, with its deep connection to the Rusanova-Zamyslovskaiia affair and with its accompanying pathologies, is a prominent feature of a number of Zoshchenko's works; it is particularly obvious in his longer tales whose depictions of narcissistic love involve lovers becoming stand-ins for idealized objects and affections correspondingly shifting with comic swiftness. Thus, in the tale 'Of What the Nightingale Sang' ('O chem pel solovei', 1925), the hero forsakes marriage to his beloved because he cannot realize his comic fixation on furnishing the marital home with his prospective mother-in-law's chest of drawers (*komod*). This comic, psychological substitution of furniture for lover is underlined by the fact that his beloved, Liza Rundukova, has a furniture-themed surname: *runduk* is an old fashioned word meaning a chest or trunk. The furniture connection, in its paltriness and banality, is of course immensely funny, but it also contains within itself a more serious irony: both ostensible love objects evoke domestic storage and are thus implicitly empty vessels, waiting to be packed with the hero's own personal baggage,

⁸¹ 3:465.

⁸² As indicated above, the symbolic economy and neurotic patterns of *Before Sunrise* will be discussed in depth in the final chapter.

both actual and psychological. This sense of a love object, be it woman or storage solution, serving as a narcissistic container for the hero's own love of self functions to ground the story's main comic conceit in the absurd extremes of the hero's ego-ideal. This is something which tells in the hero's hyperbolic insistence that, in the argument over the ownership of the chest of drawers, "he would not take one step back from his *ideals*."⁸³ The invocation of personal ideals is, of course, a form of comic exaggeration; however, it also recalls the intimate connection between narcissism and idealism that so characterises the Rusanova-Zamyslovskaja affair as analyzed above in both its biographical dimension and its fiction encryption. In fact, the narcissistic aspects of this comic substitution were, as in 'Apollon and Tamara, foreshadowed earlier in the story in a telling flower image: the ostensible object of the hero's love, Liza Rundukova, was comically introduced by the narrator of the tale as a "lily-of-the-valley and nasturtium" ("*landysh i nasturtsiia*")⁸⁴; the latter flower being famously edible and the former poisonous, the image, as well as being comically incongruous, readily captures the poisonous self-interest inhering in the hero's narcissistic love for her.

The narcissistic substitution of love objects is also central to the plot of the story 'The Nanny-Goat' ('Koza', 1923). In this tale, the hero's attempt to marry his landlady founders because he actually covets not the woman in question, but rather a goat whose ownership he erroneously attributes to her. The goat in turn comes to be associated in the mind of the hero with "abundance ... support [... and] peace".⁸⁵ Thus, his coveting of both the landlady and the goat is really part of the same narcissistic yearning for personal peace and material provision; in light of this the reader is hardly surprised to learn that by the end of the story the landlady has

⁸³ «[Н]и на шаг не отступится от своих идеалов.» *Sentimental'nye povesti*, 2:121 (my italics).

⁸⁴ 2:113.

⁸⁵ «[П]олная чаша ... Поддержка [...] Покой»; 2:14.

abandoned the hero in favour of another tenant and rival for her affections, leaving him to sink into beggary. This same pattern of narcissistic love carries into later tales as well, such as 'The Lilacs are Blooming' ('Siren' tsvetet', 1930). Here the hero leaves a marriage of convenience undertaken for selfish, material motives because his personal circumstances now afford him the luxury of a marriage for love. Trying to test the genuineness of his new bride's love by pretending to be a pauper, he fails and comes to the realization that "no-one ever did anything selflessly."⁸⁶ He thus contents himself with the narcissistic reality of love and apparently abandons his romantic ideals. This is something which the hero's of *Michel Siniagin* (*Mishel' Siniagin*, 1930) and *Youth Restored* (*Vosvrashennaia molodost'*, 1933) both conspicuously fail to do and, consequently, love, in both their cases, founders on the unacknowledged selfishness at its heart.

If there are profound resonances between the account of the Rusanova-Zamyslovskaiia affair in *Before Sunrise* and its fictional reflection, then more interesting still is the way that these same themes can be further identified in the surviving correspondence from the affair. To be sure, the available documents are minimal, taking the form of several drafts of letters from Zoshchenko to Rusanova-Zamyslovskaiia; there are of course no final versions of Zoshchenko's letters, which, if completed and sent at all, would presumably have ended up in Rusanova-Zamyslovskaiia's possession; there is also nothing at all from Rusanova-Zamyslovskaiia's side.⁸⁷ However, the draft letters that survive add a fascinating depth

⁸⁶ «[Б]ез корысти никто никогда и ничего не делает.» 2:174.

⁸⁷ These drafts are held in the Zoshchenko archive at the Institute of Russian Literature (Pushkin House) in St Petersburg; four of them have been published with a commentary by Ol'ga Shilina in the collection *Materialy k tvorcheskoi biografii* (see O Shilina, "... Eto - zhelanie liubit'. Vas'", pp.94-101). The fate of the letters from Rusanova-Zamyslovskaiia is unclear, although Shilina suggests (p.95, footnote 6) that "it is possible" («возможно») that they were destroyed in the incident related by Zoshchenko's wife when she was asked by the author during a period of illness in March 1924 to burn the letters of his "former lovers" («бывших любовниц»). The incident is described in Vera Zoshchenko's recollections edited and excerpted by G V Filippov as 'Lichnost' M. Zoshchenko po

to the picture of the romance adumbrated above. The first letter in the selection published by Shilina is dated 24th December 1915 and is evidently written from the Front. In view of the recurrent motif of unwritten letters identified above, it is not insignificant that the letter opens with an explanation of prolonged, epistolary silence: “I wouldn’t be lying to you, Nadia, if I said that since I left I have tried to write to you many times and each time I have not been able to finish the letter”.⁸⁸ Zoshchenko insists that this is not because of “laziness or disinclination to write” (“*len' ili nezhelanie pisat'*”), but rather because: “too many obscure questions, large and small, have built up in my mind, which would have embittered the letter and made you, perhaps, understand it differently.”⁸⁹ In other words, it is a fear of the pallor of words, of the text’s capacity for denaturing, even losing the intended authorial meaning that deters Zoshchenko from putting pen to paper. There is a very real sense here in which Zoshchenko voices the same disenchantment with the gestures of sentimentality that were observed in the account in *Before Sunrise* and in the story ‘Apollon and Tamara’. Importantly, he insists that he has not “prefaced” (“*predposlal'*”) it thus “in order somehow to begin a letter after a long silence; I wrote it in order to sketch out several genuine features about myself and my undefined silence.”⁹⁰ This preface is therefore not a rhetorical gesture, but an earnest attempt to accurately capture in text something of the author’s sense of selfhood.

Much of this, of course, is attributable to the genuine difficulties of staying in touch in wartime and must have been a common enough experience for soldiers and

vospominaniyam ego zheny (1916-1929)’ in N A Groznova and V P Muromskii (eds) *Mikhail Zoshchenko: Materialy k tvorcheskoi biografii* (St Petersburg: Nauka, 1997-2002), Vol. 1, p.70.

⁸⁸ «Я не солгу Вам, Надя, если скажу, что с того времени, как я уехал, я много раз пытался писать Вам и всякий раз не смог закончить письма»; “... Eto - zhelanie liubit'. Vas”, p.97.

⁸⁹ «[С]лишком много накопилось у меня неясных вопросов, больших и маленьких, которые отягчали бы письмо и заставили бы Вас, быть может, понять по-иному.» Ibid, p.97.

⁹⁰ «Это маленькое вступление я предпослал не потому, чтобы как-нибудь начать письмо после долгого молчания, я написал его, чтобы дать несколько верных штрихов о себе и своем неопределенном молчании.» Ibid, p.97.

sweethearts in all the belligerent nations; indeed, Zoshchenko even assures Rusanova-Zamyslovskaja that, were they only able to meet, “everything would become definite, everything would become clear at once”.⁹¹ However, having said this, he then gives the reader every reason to doubt the likelihood of this; the letter moves on to a pretty unsparing summary of the relationship as it approaches its fifth anniversary:

A sombre truth, a sad picture of our relations emerges: out of five years there have been at least three years of quarrels and small misunderstandings, one year of uncertain expectation and obscure thoughts and a year, perhaps, of quiet friendship plus, if you like, being a little in love (from my side).⁹²

On the basis of this, it is hard to see how being closer together would necessarily resolve anything. Particularly telling, is that parenthetical “from my side”; even in that part of the letter least concerned with himself, Zoshchenko still inscribes himself into the background.

This narcissistic need to maintain the integrity of the self translates into a profound ambivalence in his hopes for the romance. The cold tone noted above initially continues when he suggests: “let there be a calm and brave acknowledgement of friendship”;⁹³ however, this is tempered into suggestive ambivalence when the tone warms up significantly by the last line of the letter: “I wouldn’t be lying to you if I said that I remember you much more often than simple, cold friendship requires.”⁹⁴ Shilina emphasizes this ambivalent attitude to love in her commentary, suggesting that for the reader of the letters: “here before us is a poet; a romantic, dreaming of

⁹¹ «[В]се бы определилось, все бы выяснилось сразу»; Ibid, p.97.

⁹² «Выйдет печальная истина, грустная картина наших отношений: из пяти лет, по крайней мере, при года ссоры и маленьких недоразумений, год неопределенных ожиданий и неясных дум и год, быть может, спокойной дружбы плюс, пожалуй, маленькой влюбленности (с моей стороны). Ibid, p.97.

⁹³ «Пусть будет спокойное и смелое сознание дружбы.» Ibid, p.97.

⁹⁴ «Я не солгу Вам, если скажу, что вспоминаю Вас гораздо чаще, чем это требует простая холодная дружба.» Ibid, p.97.

love and at the same time being afraid of drawing near to it so as not to lose it”.⁹⁵ One might modify this slightly and suggest that it is less love itself that Zoshchenko is afraid of losing as much as he is afraid of losing himself in love; this is a corollary of that concern over losing himself in text that so characterised the opening of the letter. As will be seen later, this equivalence of loss in love and loss in text is a recurrent feature of Zoshchenko’s writing.

The narcissistic ambivalence identified above is carried to an even greater degree in the letter dated April 1916. The tone of this letter is vastly different to the previous one; it is defensive, slightly indignant and permeated by a sense of hurt. The reason for this changed tone is that it is apparently written in response to the discovery that Nadia is to marry someone else. In fact, what appears to be extracts from Nadia’s postcard with the news is elevated into an epigraph for the whole letter: “By the way, I’m getting married ... I love ... and I remember you ...”⁹⁶ Read in this context the epigraph acquires a tone of nervous coquettishness which at once recalls the affectedly coquettish note of Tamara’s letter to Apollon explaining her intention to marry the foreign businessman.⁹⁷ However, what is particularly fascinating in this letter is the image of love Zoshchenko evokes in response; he recalls an earlier conversation of theirs on the subject of marriage from the summer before he left, when he claims to have said:

If you want to prolong my love, do not ask for a wedding and do not give yourself to me. Be like a fairy tale: always desired, be a nymph

⁹⁵ «Здесь перед нами поэт. Романтик, мечтающий о любви и вместе с тем боящийся приблизиться к ней, дабы не утратить ее»; Ibid, pp.94-95.

⁹⁶ «“Между прочим, я выхожу замуж ... Люблю ... А Вас помню”» Ibid, p.99 (ellipses in original). That the epigraph is from Nadia’s postcard is not explicit, but is strongly implied by the structure of Zoshchenko’s letter; Shilina evidently reads it this way, but stresses that it is only a possible reading (same source, p.100). That the epigraph was not formally attributed is surely normal for a letter in which the quote is from a recent letter of the addressee and so would be instantly recognisable in its original context.

⁹⁷ The echo of the epigraph in ‘Apollon and Tamara’ perhaps strengthens the argument for reading the unattributed epigraph as an extract from Nadia’s postcard.

in this forest, by a whirlpool – a whirlpool, on the bank there is a water nymph [*rusalka*] ... It was only one summer ... I said this to you ... Don't give yourself to me. Now, when I am no longer intoxicated by your closeness, this is what I ask: do not give yourself to me. Later I will ask, implore affectionately and demanding, perhaps I will agree to all conditions – but do not count on it. Be elusive. You poor thing, how this has struck you ... you really did love me ... What is this – joke or whim? You did not know. This is the desire to love. You.⁹⁸

It is telling that Zoshchenko enjoins Nadia to be “elusive” apparently without realising the irony that, in marrying another, she presumably succeeds in doing just that, at least in terms of her relationship with Zoshchenko. In fact, the abiding impression is that his desire for Nadia is for an idealized image for which she stands as much as for her in concrete reality; he yearns equally for love itself as he does for his beloved *per se*. This idealized love is perhaps most obviously reflected in the telling punctuation of the last statement in the quoted extract above; that full stop between ‘love’ and ‘you’ inserts a degree of distance between love and its object that is as much symbolic as orthographic; it opens the fleeting possibility that, in psychological terms, the verb might be both transitive and intransitive. The sense that part of his love is objectless also tells in Zoshchenko’s visualisation of the romance in mythical and folkloric terms: the no doubt unintended implication is that part of it has no concrete basis in historical fact. More fascinating still is his desire to see Nadia as “a water nymph” (“*rusalka*”) from Slavic mythology; the *rusalka* is a water spirit who dwells at the bottom of lakes and first bewitches, before luring men to their deaths in the water. This is a pretty pathological amorous ideal in and of itself, but it becomes the more so when one recalls the association of the romance with a sinking ship in

⁹⁸ «Если Вы хотите продолжить любовь мою, не требуйте свадьбы и не отдавайтесь мне. Будьте как сказка: всегда желанная, будьте в этом лесу нимфа, у омута – омут, на берегу русалка... Только одно лето... Я говорил Вам это... Не отдавайтесь мне. Сейчас, когда я не опьянен еще близостью Вашей, я так прошу: не отдавайтесь мне. Потом я буду просить, умолять ласково и требовательно, может быть, соглашусь на все условия – не верьте. Будьте неуловимы. Бедная, как Вас поразило это... Вы ведь любили меня... Что это – насмешка или прихоть? Вы не знали. Это желание любить. Вас.» Ibid, p.99 [all ellipses present in the original].

Before Sunrise and noted above. Importantly though, for all this symbolic weight, Zoshchenko is not simply in love with a detached symbol; if he were, the marriage of his beloved would presumably leave that symbol intact and thus not change anything. That his letter is shot through with a sense of hurt and loss implies that his idealized, symbolic love is impossibly tied to an object with its own concrete, objective existence. It is thus a profoundly narcissistic love; his loss is in part of loss of self, that loss “of a more ideal kind” which, as shown in chapter one, Freud suggested afflicts the melancholic.

Before leaving these letters, it is important to confront the issue of duplication and the confused dating which Shilina notes in her commentary; she observes that two of the letters are “almost identical” (“*pochti identichny*”) in content, yet are dated one year apart from each other.⁹⁹ In her parenthetical editorial emendations, Shilina seems to suggest the possibility that the date of the earlier letter may be wrong, however she offers no indication of the reason for selecting the later date as correct and there is nothing in the letters themselves that allows for one date to be chosen over the other.¹⁰⁰ However, more interesting than the exact date of the letter is the fact of the apparent repetition of content across time; in particular, the divergent dates combined with such striking similarity of content must surely suggest some kind of writing beyond the events themselves. In this respect it is crucial to remember that the surviving letters are only drafts and, in the absence of the other side of the correspondence, there can be no certainty that they were ever sent, or even that they were ever intended to be sent. Given all this, it is surely plausible that some (or perhaps even all) of these letters could have been written after the event and backdated, quite possibly without a view to sending them. This would account for the

⁹⁹ Ibid, p.96.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, p.98.

inconsistent dating and repetition, but, more interestingly, it would make the surviving letters some kind of personal exercise in re-living and re-writing a profound personal loss. This kind of re-writing of the event in unsent letters would seem to lend itself to being conceived as some sort of attempt at catharsis in a broadly Aristotelian sense, whereby the mimetic performance in text of a deep personal loss might function to facilitate emotional release or psychic purgation.¹⁰¹ Given the prominence of the theme of epistolary silence in all the fictional and autobiographical rehearsals of the romance analyzed above, it is quite conceivable that these letters are, in part at least, an attempt to re-write the incident: to write the letter that was never sent, or to send earlier the letter that might have changed the course of things. This view perhaps finds further support in the fact that Shilina found a series of five type-written copies in the same *fond* as the hand-written drafts she published; two of these corresponded to hand-written drafts with which they did not completely coincide, while the remaining three had no corresponding hand-written draft.¹⁰² She decided not to publish these because, in the absence of identifiable handwriting, the provenance could not be unambiguously asserted; yet, taking their thematic connection to the published drafts into account, it is surely quite possible to read these as further evidence of re-writing beyond the time of the affair.

In this respect, it is important to note that Shilina, following the earlier example of Dmitrii Moldavskii, detects notes of stylistic experimentation and a search for poetic voice in Zoshchenko's correspondence from this period, something Shilina particularly emphasizes in connection with the drafts of the Rusanova-Zamyslovskaiia letters.¹⁰³ This view of the letters as proto-literary artefacts perhaps allows one to

¹⁰¹ See the seminal discussion of tragedy in Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. M Heath (London: Penguin, 1996).

¹⁰² "... Eto - zhelanie liubit'. Vas'", p.98.

¹⁰³ Ibid, p.94. Moldavskii sees the letter form in general as offering a kind of literary test-bed for Zoshchenko before he found his literary niche and imputes a self-contained literary value to the early

observe in them the first steps in a process of re-thinking and re-enacting the lost love in text that would ultimately extend to fully-fledged works of fiction. This would certainly account for the intensely personal resonances of the affair evident in the stories analyzed above. In view of this it is interesting that, in her memoir of Zoshchenko, the artist Nina Noskovich-Lekarenko mentions being shown a photograph of Nadia Rusanova-Zamyslovskaja during a visit to the writer's home in the thirties:

On his writing desk, under glass was a small photograph of a beautiful young woman in a large hat of the 1914-15 fashion. Mikhail Mikhailovich told me, having shown this portrait, that once he had really loved this lady and that she now lived abroad.¹⁰⁴

This recollection confirms the extent to which the loss of his first love haunted Zoshchenko; it is also hugely significant, in view of the extensive literary rehearsal of the affair suggested above, that the photograph stands on the writer's desk. Indeed, holding this image in mind and recalling the fact that Rusanova-Zamyslovskaja married into the landed gentry, it is surely too tempting to resist speculating that the photograph of the lady aristocrat in the large hat informed, to some degree at least, that famously hatted female aristocrat of Zoshchenko's much loved story of that name, the opening lines of which are:

Well brothers, I can't stand women in hats. If she's in a hat, if she's got lisle stockings on, or a little pug in her arms, or a gold tooth then that kind's an aristocrat to me and not a woman at all, just blank space.¹⁰⁵

letters; see D M Moldavskii, *Mikhail Zoshchenko: ocherk tvorchestva* (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1977), p.13.

¹⁰⁴ «На бюро под стеклом маленькая фотография красивой маленькой женщины в большой шляпе моды 1914-1915 гг. Михаил Михайлович сказал мне, показав этот портрет, что когда-то он очень любил эту даму и что живет она за границей.» N A Noskovich-Lekarenko, 'Slava – eto vdova' in Iu V Tomashevskii (ed), *Vspominaia Mikhaila Zoshchenko* (Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1990), pp. 304-305.

¹⁰⁵ «Я, братцы мои, не люблю баб, которые в шляпках. Ежели баба в шляпке, ежели чулочки на ней фильдекосовые, или мопсик у ней на руках, или зуб золотой, то такая аристократка мне и не баба вовсе, а гладкое место.» 'Aristokratka', 1:170.

Read in this way, the hidden personal subtext of love and loss suggested above perhaps infuses that Gogolian sounding “blank space” (“*gladkoe mesto*”) with a profoundly melancholic sense of personal loss; importantly the “*gladkoe mesto*” is perhaps most memorably associated with Gogol’s famous story ‘The Nose’ (‘Nos’, 1836) where it denoted the space left when the eponymous organ absconded: it thus evokes a very profound, almost bodily loss of selfhood.

Crucially though, such a reading is quite impossible without extra-textual reference to details of the Rusanova-Zamyslovskaja story; without this authorial subtext the story remains one of the most unambiguously funny works ever to come from Zoshchenko’s pen. This highlights an extremely important aspect of the written self analyzed here: read on its own basis (i.e. without recourse to extra-textual reference) it completely disappears from view in much the same way as the personal motivations of the hero of the story ‘The Writer’ remained undetectable until such time as the writer’s wife provided the requisite extra-textual reference. However, this effacement of the written self is not as total as it seems; just as with Nikolai Droviskin from ‘The Writer’, the contours and traces of it remain with sufficient coherence to appear like some magic-eye image when the reader adopts an extra-textual perspective. This sense of a self simultaneously lost and found in text has a hugely melancholic resonance; it particularly resonates with Kristeva’s understanding of the melancholic subject’s failure to lose an infantile selfhood in the symbolic expanses of language and the adoption of an ambivalent position between a self already other in language and a yearning for a primal, maternal immanence. There is thus a profound irony in the textual re-workings of a lost love suggested above: it becomes something of a double loss, where each rehearsal of libidinal deprivation acquires an additional dimension in the form of textual deprivation. This is a self lost

and found in text over and over again in an unending melancholic infinity. Rather than being cathartic, one might rather suppose this to be more an instance of that descent into a litany of melancholic obsession which Robert Burton, in his book *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621-51), famously characterized as the tendency of the melancholic mind to “work upon itself, melancholize.”¹⁰⁶

Hidden Expressionism

The textual refraction of the Rusanova-Zamyslovskaiia romance suggested above really constitutes an additional strand of the much more extensive textual self analyzed by Alexander Zholkovsky and discussed in the introduction to the current study. The value of the foregoing is thus, in the first instance, an embellishment of Zholkovsky's broader thesis which posits a unified Zoshchenko oeuvre held together by autobiographical “invariants” (“*invarianty*”).¹⁰⁷ Zholkovsky himself actually makes surprisingly little of the textual refraction of the Rusanova-Zamyslovskaiia/Nadia V episode. He acknowledges her importance in the life of the writer, suggesting that “the greatest unrealized love of M[ikhail] Z[oshchenko] was Nadia V”;¹⁰⁸ yet he only finds thematic parallels of the affair in the relatively unknown late story ‘Twenty Years After’ (‘Dvadtsat' let spustia’, 1937).¹⁰⁹ This story was written at a time when Zoshchenko was already working on *Before Sunrise* and thus, arguably, the parallels with the Nadia V episodes in that work are less significant to Zholkovsky's broader thesis than the earlier ones suggested above. Therefore, the analysis thus far develops an aspect of Zholkovsky's thesis and posits a greater importance for this aspect than Zholkovsky finds. This is important to note because in

¹⁰⁶ R Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (New York: New York Review Books, 2001), 2nd Partition, p. 109.

¹⁰⁷ A K Zholkovskii, *Poetika nedoveriia*, *passim*.

¹⁰⁸ «Самой большой и неосуществленной любовью МЗ была Надя В.» Ibid, p.269.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, pp.269-271.

the last chapter of this study it will be argued that the Rusanova-Zamyslovskaja/Nadia V affair occupies a much more important place in the structure of *Before Sunrise* than has hitherto been acknowledged.

It is important to note that when the full breadth of Zholkovsky's thesis is taken into account in this way, the extent of the written self contained in Zoshchenko's works of the twenties expands far beyond what has been outlined above. In locating echoes of autobiographical themes and the patterns of neurotic symbolism that structure *Before Sunrise* in a huge range of ostensibly fictional, and mostly comic texts from earlier in the writer's career, Zholkovsky depicts Zoshchenko as a kind of expressionist "concerned with pouring his own 'emotional states' onto the page."¹¹⁰ He argues that this authorial expressionism is a consistent feature across the oeuvre, that "Zoshchenko's comic stories are made of exactly the same stuff as the dreams, neuroses and autobiographical vignettes in B[efore] S[unrise]."¹¹¹ Zholkovsky acknowledges that these personal aspects in the earlier works are estranged through a range of textual strategies and literary masks;¹¹² yet he still outlines an extensive written self stretching across all of Zoshchenko's fiction. In this Zholkovsky has performed an inestimable service for future Zoshchenko scholarship and has inaugurated a complete paradigm-shift in Zoshchenko criticism with his suggestion of a writer concerned as much with writing the self as with satirical engagement with external reality. However, where the foregoing analysis of the textual refraction of the Rusanova-Zamyslovskaja affair moves beyond the simple embellishment of Zholkovsky's important thesis is in its suggestion of the way in which that written self of the twenties was visible only to the writer himself.

¹¹⁰ A K Zholkovsky, "What Is the Author Trying to Say with His Artistic Work?", p.464.

¹¹¹ Ibid, p.459.

¹¹² See for example *Poetika nedoveriia*, pp. 261-287.

If the echoes of the Rusanova-Zamyslovskaja affair would have been lost on a contemporary readership, then precisely the same can be said of every aspect of the written self in the twenties that Zholkovsky finds. What is perhaps lost in Zholkovsky's holistic reading of the oeuvre in terms of authorial "invariants" is the degree of differentiation between a written self in the twenties that is invisible on its own terms, and a written self in the thirties and forties that is more explicitly self-disclosing. To be sure, one of the primary aims of Zholkovsky's study is to weld together the two sides of the Zoshchenko oeuvre and he makes it clear throughout that his understanding of the corpus is based on retrospective readings of the earlier fiction in the light of the revelations in *Before Sunrise*.¹¹³ He also makes clear his interpretation of *Before Sunrise* as a kind of authorial coda offering "explicit critical insights that are usually the scholar's business to uncover."¹¹⁴ But what needs to be more explicitly stated in the context of Zholkovsky's general thesis is that the expansive and intensely crafted written self that Zholkovsky finds in Zoshchenko's works of the twenties would have been consigned to general interpretative oblivion at the time it was written.

Even the most perceptive, sympathetic and diligent reader in the twenties would only have been able to establish Zholkovsky's authorial invariants as, at most, thematic patterns or stylistic peculiarities; it would have been all but impossible to establish their basis in the life of a writer who, for most of the twenties, was frustratingly evasive on questions of biography. Crucially, the kind of reading proposed by Zholkovsky is something that is only possible with recourse to *Before Sunrise* and, to a lesser degree, the posthumous appearance of a wealth of biographical and memoir literature about the writer. It goes without saying that this in

¹¹³ Ibid, pp.7-10.

¹¹⁴ "What Is the Author Trying to Say with His Artistic Work?", p.459.

no way invalidates Zholkovsky's approach; rather the point is made to emphasize the historical perspective of that approach. Zholkovsky's thesis is a retrospective survey of the completed Zoshchenko oeuvre; the fact that the written self it identifies in the works of the twenties is accessible only through this retrospective view reveals two important aspects of that textual selfhood. Firstly, as suggested above, the vast written self that Zholkovsky maps in the work of the twenties would have been almost completely invisible at the time it was composed; secondly, in spite of this contemporary invisibility it still persists as a kind of textual potential awaiting only the interpretative key provided by *Before Sunrise*. When these two linked observations are taken together, the act of writing this intricate textual self in the twenties becomes much more complex than Zholkovsky's thesis implies. In offering up a written self without the requisite hermeneutic key, the act becomes a significant gesture of authorial self-effacement; yet, in the written self's persistence as textual potential the attempt to escape the self in text ultimately fails. What one is left with is a mode of authorship characterised by a melancholic ambivalence between a self both lost and found in text. When one considers the full extent of the written self of the twenties that Zholkovsky reveals in such encyclopaedic detail, this cycle of thwarted self-effacement in text becomes an authorial gesture of breath-taking melancholy.

Zoshchenko's Overcoat

In his monograph on Zoshchenko, Zholkovsky makes much of the parallels between Gogol and Zoshchenko; he notes similarities in their lives and deaths; he notes the degree to which both endured the misapprehension of contemporary critics; finally, he notes how Zoshchenko "would rework many typical Gogolian themes and plots, in

particular the motif of the 'overcoat' taken from the 'little man'.¹¹⁵ Of course, Zholkovsky is not alone in invoking authorial analogies with Gogol; comparisons with the enigmatic nineteenth-century writer seem to have arisen from the very moment Zoshchenko appeared on the literary stage in the early twenties.¹¹⁶ Interestingly, the suggestion of Gogolian parallels seems not only to have pleased Zoshchenko, but to have been something he actively indulged in himself. Zoshchenko's widow has amply testified in her diaries to this aspect of her husband's artistic practice, suggesting that "Gogol's subjects are his [Zoshchenko's] subjects" and that "even in some trifles of [Gogol's] life he finds resemblance to his literary fate."¹¹⁷ This predilection on the part of the writer for finding Gogolian parallels in his life and art has doubtless lent special credence to similar comparisons by critics and memoirists with the result that elaborating poetic and biographical similarities between the twentieth-century satirist and his nineteenth-century hero has become something of a critical convention in Zoshchenko scholarship.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ «Он разрабатывал многие типично гоголевские темы и сюжеты, в частности мотив 'шинели', похищаемой у 'маленького человека'.» *Poetika nedoveriia*, p.14.

¹¹⁶ One of the earliest such comparisons was made by Aleksei Remizov, whom Zoshchenko met at the Petrograd House of Arts in 1921, shortly before Remizov left Russia for good. According to private correspondence between Marietta Chudakova and the publisher and memoirist Samuil Alianskii, in 1921 Remizov urged Alianskii to: "Take care of Zoshchenko! He is our's, a contemporary Gogol." («Берегите Зошенко. Это наш, современный Гоголь.») M Chudakova, *Poetika Mikhaila Zoshchenko* (Moscow: Nauka, 1979), p. 37.

¹¹⁷ «Сюжеты Гоголя – его сюжеты. [...] Даже в некоторых жизненных мелочах он находит сходство с своей литературной судьбой.» V Zoshchenko's recollections edited and excerpted by G V Filippov as 'Lichnost' M. Zoshchenko po vospominaniiam ego zheny (1916-1929)' in N A Groznova and V P Muromskii (eds) *Mikhail Zoshchenko: Materialy k tvorcheskoi biografii* (St Petersburg: Nauka, 1997-2002), Vol. 1, p.69.

¹¹⁸ Most critics and scholars from twenties onwards have noted some or other Gogolian echoes in Zoshchenko's fiction. As early as 1922 Voronskii noted in a review of the Sinebriukhov stories that "Zoshchenko comes out of Leskov and Gogol." («Зошенко идет от Лескова и Гоголя.» A Voronskii, 'Mikhail Zoshchenko. "Rasskazy Nazara Il'icha gospodina Sinebriukhova"' in *Litso i maska*, p.136. Originally published in *Krasnaia nov'*, 1922, No.6). Petr Bitsili made a more systematic contribution to the comparison in his essay 'Zoshchenko i Gogol' originally published in Paris in 1932 (reprinted in *Litso i maska*, pp.179-183). That the critical appeal of the comparison remains as potent now as ever is evident in two recent works by Igor' Sukhikh: see his 'Iz gogolevskoi shinel'i (1923-1930. *Sentimentalnye povesti* M. Zoshchenko), *Zvezda*, 2000, vol. 2, pp.218-227 and his introductory essay 'Gogolek' in M M Zoshchenko, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 8 volumes ed. I Sukhikh (Moscow: Vremia, 2008), volume entitled *Raznotyk*, pp. 5-97.

However, what is distinctive in Zholkovsky's Gogolian parallel is his focus on similarities between the writers' modes of authorship more than their lives, styles or plots. In particular, he characterizes the expressionist mode of authorship he attributes to the writer in explicitly Gogolian terms, arguing that Zoshchenko's semi-confessional writing is analogous to that process of imbuing fiction with one's "personal rubbish" ("sobstvennoi drian'iu") which Gogol claimed of his own work in *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends* (*Vybrannie mesta iz perepiski s druz'iami*, 1847).¹¹⁹ Locating the kernel of the Gogolian parallel in Zoshchenko at the level of authorship is an important critical development, and one anticipated to some extent by Tatiana Kadash.¹²⁰ With this in mind, it seems natural to elaborate the sense of paradoxically hidden expressionism suggested so far in this chapter in similarly Gogolian terms; for this purpose the most fruitful paradigm is the extensive intertextual reworking of the theme of 'The Overcoat' ('Shinel', 1842) in Zoshchenko's comic fiction of the twenties. To be sure, Zholkovsky notes both the presence and the extent of this theme, highlighting the existence of "a widespread Zoshchenko arche-plot (which has come out from Gogol's 'Overcoat')";¹²¹ however, he does not really connect this with his over-riding concern with establishing Zoshchenko's adherence to a mode of authorship characterized by the Gogolian confessional. As the rest of this chapter will show, the widespread intertextual refraction of 'The Overcoat' in Zoshchenko's comic fiction both fictionalizes the melancholic ambivalence of narcissistic selfhood, and also stages the related

¹¹⁹ *Poetika nedoveriia*, p.16.

¹²⁰ Kadash argues that Gogol's function for Zoshchenko was as a kind of ready-made authorial persona which the Soviet writer more or less consciously adopted in his attempts to understand his own work and place in Russian literature (See T. Kadash, 'Gogol' v tvorcheskoi refleksii Zoshchenko' in Iu Tomashevskii (ed) *Litso i maska Mikhaila Zoshchenko* (Moscow: Olimp, 1994), pp. 282-291). This important theory, while not without relevance in the context of the current discussion, really comes into its own with Zoshchenko's experiments with fictionalized authorial personas in the thirties and forties.

¹²¹ «Распространенный зощенковский архисюжет (вышедший из гоголевской 'Шинели')»; *Poetika nedoveriia*, p. 192.

melancholic ambivalence of the written self that has been seen throughout this chapter.

Cathy Popkin has demonstrated the breadth of the intertextual refraction of 'The Overcoat' in Zoshchenko's comic fiction at length; in fact her mapping of the extent of this intertextual structure remains by far the most thorough. Citing numerous examples of problematic undressing, Popkin comes to view 'The Overcoat' as a sort of proto-plot, a narrative standard which Zoshchenko "re-writes" time and again to the point of adopting "the traumatic loss of a coat as one of his quintessential plots".¹²² However, having convincingly portrayed its extensive nature, she interprets Zoshchenko's cooption of Gogol's story solely in terms of cultural politics and social satire. Thus, noting how for Zoshchenko "every coat removal is also an act of exposure", Popkin stresses only the social significance of such exposure leaving this multi-faceted theme unexplored in psychological or existential terms.¹²³ Instead, she stresses the way in which this exposure stands in opposition to an ideologically defined framework of significance, suggesting that "Zoshchenko specializes in indecent exposure, exposés that are emphatically 'too x'".¹²⁴ In this view Zoshchenko's refraction of Gogol's tale becomes another strand in Popkin's general understanding of Zoshchenko's satire as a subversive assault on prevailing, state-sponsored notions of tellability, an intentional act of political satire that she ultimately comes to term "the politics of perceptibility".¹²⁵ In this "politics of perceptibility" the politics very much outweighs the perceptibility: for Popkin, what is important about Zoshchenko's thematic concentration on "the removal of coats" is less the possible

¹²² C Popkin, *The Pragmatics of Insignificance: Chekhov, Zoshchenko, Gogol* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 72-73. Popkin goes on to demonstrate the extent this phenomenon in compelling detail; see pp. 72-84 in the same work.

¹²³ Ibid, p. 84.

¹²⁴ Ibid, p. 76.

¹²⁵ Ibid, p. 93.

meaning of the coat motif than its function as a marker of triviality which subversively “replaces the removal of czars as the event of record”.¹²⁶ Whether one accepts this reading of Zoshchenko as a closet political subversive or not (and there are important reasons why one might question it), Popkin’s exclusively socio-cultural approach remains far from exhaustive in interpretive terms.¹²⁷ In particular, her approach does not engage with the psychological issues or the theme of human subjectivity that her important reading brings to the surface. This is something particularly obvious in Popkin’s concluding remarks to her exploration of the coat theme in Zoshchenko:

In Zoshchenko’s universe, where a naked man is a dead man and all the world’s a stage, costume is the great admission ticket to life. As we have seen, clothing not only signifies, indentifying and legitimizing its bearer, but insofar as only designated costumes are acceptable, the presence or absence of attire motivates and thematizes exclusion: from theatre, from bathhouse, from streetcar, from restaurant, from text.¹²⁸

This passage is brimming with the psychological and existential aspects of exposure and exclusion; it even touches on death, that most profound source of existential exposure. It abounds with suggestive notions of alienation, both socially and, most importantly, textually. The idea that coat theft constitutes the revoking of “the great admission ticket to life” must surely point as much to a psychological and existential aspect of the exposure and exclusion Popkin finds in the ‘Overcoat’ intertext as to the social meaning she ultimately finds in it. However, in the final count, it is only in socio-cultural terms that she understands Zoshchenko’s invocation of Gogol’s coat:

¹²⁶ Ibid, p. 76.

¹²⁷ It is beyond the scope of either the present chapter or this study as a whole to explore such socio-cultural readings of Zoshchenko’s comic oeuvre. Nonetheless, in this context one might suggest that any attempt at reading Zoshchenko as a more or less conscious political subversive must confront a wealth of textual and extra-textual evidence pointing to the writer’s (sometimes agonizing) attempts both to adapt himself to the times and to make himself useful in an emerging Soviet reality. Zoshchenko’s acceptance and understanding of this Soviet reality was of course not uncomplicated, but any attempt to portray his work as consciously anti-Soviet must remain problematic in the extreme.

¹²⁸ *Pragmatics of Insignificance*, p. 84.

Coats come to stand for all those unwritten, but familiar, interdictions; the various gatekeepers allude to the enforcers of that arbitrary order; and the failure to comply with the coat code represents deviation as such.¹²⁹

Ignoring the existential implications she broaches in the previous passage, Popkin concludes by privileging a social interpretation at the expense of the multi-faceted nature of the Gogolian exposure she uncovers. Ironically enough, in limiting the understanding of Zoshchenko's Gogolian exposure to the uncomplicated challenging of social codes and culturally-conditioned standards of meaningfulness, Popkin, in a sense, re-enacts the same exclusively socio-cultural reading of Zoshchenko's refraction of Gogol that nineteenth-century critics have been accused of doing with Gogol himself: a social reading of Gogol that would seem unthinkable today.

Popkin's analysis of 'The Overcoat' intertext thus usefully draws attention to the extent of plot echoes of 'The Overcoat' in Zoshchenko's comic fiction; yet there remains much to explore in terms of interpreting the function of such extensive intertextual refraction. In particular what is required is a greater appreciation of the subjective nature of the Gogolian exposure it evokes, an exposure that takes place at that melancholic point of contention, so important for the classic Zoshchenko hero, where subjective and objective realities clash. The story 'Love' ('Liubov', 1924) is useful in this regard as its allusion to Gogol's 'Overcoat' is both obvious and widely established by critics.¹³⁰ The story itself opens with two tired and sweaty revelers stepping out of a late party into the cold night air. The hero, a certain Vasia Chesnokov, pleads with his companion Mashen'ka to wait for the first tram, but she is anxious to get going, so they pull on their coats and set off into the night. As they walk Vasia indulges in grandiloquent declarations of his love for Mashen'ka and

¹²⁹ Ibid, p. 84.

¹³⁰ For example, Popkin notes it in *Pragmatics of Significance*, p. 73, as does Zholkovsky in *Poetika nedoveriia*, p. 23.

makes increasingly extravagant boasts about the feats of daring he would perform were his beloved only to will it: he offers to lie on the tram rails and await the first tram, to bash the back of his head against a wall, even to throw himself into the Kriukov canal. It is precisely at the height of this boastful valor, while he is still swinging from the rail at the edge of the canal pretending to throw himself in, that a threatening figure suddenly emerges from the darkness, demanding the hero's coat. In a hilarious comic reversal, all vestiges of bravery desert the stunned Vasia, who, not only meekly complies with the demands of the thief, but, noticing that the villain is paying no attention to his 'beloved', gently tries to steer his attention towards her possessions as well.

The parallels with 'The Overcoat' are easy to spot in this tale and are more far-reaching than the obviously shared motif of coat theft. The settings are similar in both Zoshchenko's and Gogol's stories, with the action taking place on a winter's night in Petersburg while walking home after a party. Similarly, the thieves in both tales are as menacing as they are indistinct, emerging from and shrinking back into the shadows with the unnerving stealth of phantoms. In addition, both Akakii Akakievich, the hero of Gogol's tale, and Vasia Chesnokov wait for the thieves to disappear before trying to summon help with the particular cry of: "Karaul!" ("Help!").¹³¹ Interestingly, the heroes in both tales also experience a disturbing, if unspecific, premonition of the coming theft. Akakii Akakievich enters the square where the theft of his coat eventually takes place "not without a kind of involuntary fear, exactly as if his heart felt a foreboding of something unpleasant"¹³² This foreboding is perhaps more obliquely articulated in Zoshchenko's story, but it is nonetheless something shared by Zoshchenko's hero. Indeed, the hero's impassioned

¹³¹ M Zoshchenko, 'Liubov', 1:195 and N V Gogol, 'Shinel', p.395.

¹³² «Он вступил на площадь не без какой-то невольной боязни, точно как будто сердце его предчувствовало что-то недоброе.» 'Shinel', p. 359.

pleading to wait for the first tram can be readily understood as a reticence born of just such a premonition of unspecified loss. Moreover, when he eventually relents and complies with Mashen'ka's wishes, he does so with a reluctance that surely goes beyond his purported fear of catching cold: "Vasia Chesnokov submissively pulled on his coat and went out onto the street with Mashen'ka, having firmly taken her arm."¹³³ It is important to note the ambiguity of that "firmly taken her arm": on the one hand it is the possessive gesture of the protective gallant, but then in view of Vasia's obvious reluctance to go outside it might equally be read as evidence of his fear, of his craving for security and warmth from Masha. In an equally important sense, it can of course be read as both, but either way it seems to point to an anticipation of the worst.

This sense of premonition serves to build up the importance of the upcoming event in a way that the actual crime, for all its threatened violence and actual humiliation, only partly lives up to. This disparity is only deepened further by the curiously excessive trauma suffered by the heroes of both tales following the robbery. Akakii Akakievich, unable to find redress for his loss, slips into solipsistic incoherence, before succumbing to a fatal quinsy. Meanwhile, Vasia Chesnokov, although not killed off, ends up talking to himself before running off across the snow "jumping and twitching his legs in terror", leaving Mashen'ka standing alone against the railings by the canal.¹³⁴ It is important to note here how both Vasia and Akakii Akakievich turn inward: they both start talking to themselves and ultimately turn away from others seeking refuge in the chimerical certainties of the self. Yet this strange existential aspect of their behavior is difficult to square with the crime they are victims of. Without wishing to underestimate the terror, humiliation and personal violation that undoubtedly must have accompanied such a robbery, nor intending to

¹³³ «Вася Чесноков покорно надел шубу и вышел с Машенькой на улицу, крепко взяв ее под руку.» 'Liubov', 1:194.

¹³⁴ «в ужасе подпрыгивая и дергая ногами»; 1:194.

underplay the magnitude of the material loss in a cold climate and straitened circumstances, the sense of existential tragedy that characterizes both heroes' response to the theft seems ultimately inappropriate, or, perhaps more accurately, seems to point to a concurrent psychological or existential drama unfolding alongside, and partially obscured by the more obvious criminal one.

This perplexing existential dimension is something that perhaps becomes more obvious when comparing Zoshchenko's coat theft with other instances of aggravated disrobing in contemporary humorous writing. Indeed, the motif of coat theft is by no means uncommon in satirical writing of this period, no doubt evidencing a cultural relevance which points to it being as much an actual as a literary hazard. Lesley Milne notes how a whole issue of the journal *Novyi Satirikon* in March 1918 was devoted to the theme of the well-dressed being robbed of their clothes in the street, and even quotes a sketch from that journal where "instead of boasting that he is dressed by the best tailors, a man-about-town might now boast of being undressed in the best streets in the capital."¹³⁵ It is a testament to both the humorous potential and continuing cultural salience of this conceit that it persists beyond the uncertainties of the revolutionary era, with similar themes being found later in the satirical press of NEP-era Leningrad. For instance, the satirical journal *Begemot (The Hippopotamus)* carried a cartoon by Aleksandr Iunger (himself a former *Satirokonets*) on the back page of a December issue entitled 'Winter Pursuits' ('Zimnie razvlecheniia'). The caption ponders rhetorically: "What remains of traditional winter pursuits?" Confessing that, "In all conscience, one must say not much is left", it then provides four illustrated examples of everyday Soviet unpleasantness, humorously given the title of a

¹³⁵ 'Sredi razdevaemykh: Zakonnaia gordost'', *Novyi Satirikon*, No.4, March 1918, p.5. Translated, quoted and analyzed by L Milne in 'Novyi Satirikon, 1914-1918: The Patriotic Laughter of the Russian Liberal Intelligentsia during the First World War and the Revolution', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 84, 4, October 2006, p. 660. [pp. 639-665].

traditional winter pursuit.¹³⁶ The third of these is entitled 'Hunting for Furs' ('Okhota na pushnogo zveria') and depicts a man being robbed of his fur-lined overcoat at gunpoint. The text declares:

Sometimes this also happens. There's no need to leave town even: right in the city, without a pack of hounds, without special hunting weapons, with only a pistol they take such a pelt, it's as simple as that.¹³⁷

Lurking behind the laughter in both of these comic coat thefts is of course anger and fear; something particularly marked in the *Novyi Satirikon* example whose "fear of the street" Milne characterizes as "ironic *sang-froid*".¹³⁸ Arguably in both there is also a sense of social tragedy and, to varying degrees, nostalgia for past certainties. However, for all the latent anxiety and regret evident in both examples, there is absolutely no sense of Zoshchenko's (or Gogol's) existential horror. There is no tragic crisis of subjectivity on the part of the victim; in place of the catastrophic collapse of selfhood that so plainly and bafflingly befalls both Vasia Chesnokov and Akakii Akakievich, there is a more understandable sense of stoical bemusement and implicit moral scorn.

Zoshchenko's and Gogol's heroes, otherwise so different in terms of character and setting, find their deepest intertextual kinship in the baffling subjective meanings that they so obviously invest, and so dramatically lose, in their respective coats. In Zoshchenko's tale, no explicit indication is offered as to the nature of Vasia's relation to his coat leaving the reader's nagging curiosity unsatisfied. This dearth of surface-level, narrative direction thus leaves the reader little option but to turn to the

¹³⁶ «Что осталось от традиционных зимних развлечений? По совести говоря, мало чего осталось. Вот разве что»: 'Zimnie razvlecheniia' (unattributed text accompanying a drawing by A. Iunger). *Begemot*, No.48, December 1925, p.16.

¹³⁷ «Иной раз и это случается. За город даже выезжать не надо. Прямо в городе. Без своры собак, без специальных ружей – с одним пистолетом такую шкуру снимут, что просто аж.» Ibid, p.16.

¹³⁸ L. Milne, 'Novyi Satirikon', p.660.

intertextual substratum that is so clearly, and deliberately, interwoven into the fabric of Zoshchenko's tale. In a sense the Gogolian intertext functions here to turn the reader's attention inward, reflecting textually the inward retreat of both Vasia and Akakii Akakievich. The intertextual structure of Zoshchenko's story plays the part of a kind of 'subconscious' textual memory, prompting the reader to look beyond the textual surface of the tale to its underside, to look into its textual prehistory.

Gogol famously described Akakii Akakievich's problematic relation to his new overcoat in terms of love, describing how despite enduring numerous privations, including going without food:

[Akakii Akakievich] was nourished spiritually, carrying in his thoughts the eternal idea of the future overcoat. From that time on it was as if his very existence was made somehow fuller, as if he had married, as if some kind of other person was there with him, as if he was not alone, but some pleasant friend for life had agreed to walk with him down life's road – and this friend was none other than that very overcoat with its thick cotton-wool quilting, with its strong lining that would not wear out.¹³⁹

The relevance of this passage to understanding Vasia's coat complex is underscored by the title of Zoshchenko's story: 'Love'. However, this intertextual citation functions in a more complex way than simply affirming the coat's place in Vasia's affections. For Gogol's playful, hyperbolic passage, while clearly comic in tone, is also indispensable in comprehending the ultimate tragedy in 'The Overcoat', a tragedy which is shared by Zoshchenko's hero. This is a tragedy of narcissistic object loss; it originates with the libidinal investment of self in an object with an independent objective existence. Despite Akakii Akakievich's love for the coat and the personal

¹³⁹ «[Акакий Акакиевич] питался духовно, нося в мыслях своих вечную идею будущей шинели. С этих пор как будто самое существование его сделалось как-то полнее, как будто бы он женился, как будто какой-то другой человек присутствовал с ним, как будто он был не один, а какая-то приятная подруга жизни согласилась с ним проходить вместе жизненную дорогу, - и подруга эта была не кто другая, как та же шинель на толстой вате, на крепкой подкладке без износу.» 'Shinel', p. 355.

projection of self into it that this love manifests, the coat, nevertheless, remains just that: a coat, the theft of which neatly demonstrates its objective resistance to any kind of narcissistic transfiguration. It is precisely this insight which Zoshchenko's story 'Love' draws upon: Vasia's extreme reaction to the theft of his coat only really begins to make any sense once his personal investment in the garment is considered in the light of that of Gogol's unfortunate clerk. In an important sense his tragedy is also that of Akakii Akakievich: an object loss that through his narcissistic investment in it translates into a loss of self. Importantly, this narcissistic aspect accounts not only for the extremity of existential exposure identified above, but also for the indecent haste with which Vasia abandons his ostensible 'beloved' Mashen'ka.

At this point, it is important to note the fact that this story shares a title with the 1922 story called 'Love' analyzed earlier in this chapter. This kind of recycling of titles is by no means common in Zoshchenko's comic fiction and it undoubtedly underlines a thematic connection between these two pieces which otherwise differ quite markedly in terms of form. The two pieces do share Petersburg settings, and common themes of forsaken love and empty romantic suicide threats; however, these are just the most visible aspects of a deeper thematic kinship linking the two tales: both tales are more fundamentally linked by a shared rehearsal of the dynamics of narcissistic object loss. Indeed, this is something that unites these stories with all those other tales of garment loss that Popkin analyses, and indeed with all the other instances of love objects eluding the acquisitive grasp of narcissistic libido suggested so far in this chapter.

At another level, however, one might look at this iterative rehearsal of narcissistic object loss in terms of authorship. Thinking back to the discussion of Gogolian melancholy in the first chapter of this study, it will be remembered that it

was suggested that 'The Overcoat' includes a playful meditation on the slippery nature of the literary word: that verbal creation always threatening to break free from its author and to elude the grasp of his personal meaning. In terms of this conceit, Akakievich's narcissitic investment in his coat could equally be held to stand for the author's narcissistic investment in his writing; moreover, Akakievich's cruel exposure in the wake of his violent dispossession of his overcoat could equally be held to stand for the author's cruel exposure in the wake of his violent dispossession of the self inscribed in the written word. Conceived in this way, Zoshchenko's overcoat becomes more than simply a stylistic device; it becomes the fictional testimony of that written self endlessly committed to textual oblivion that was analyzed in the first part of this chapter: it becomes a highly suggestive model of melancholic authorship.

Chapter 4

Who Speaks?

The previous two chapters analyzed a melancholia woven into the fabric of Zoshchenko's 'Brussels lace'; both as textual absence and as authorial aporia, this melancholia simultaneously manages to occupy a position of textual centrality while always remaining suggestively unvoiced. If many of Zoshchenko's works from the twenties thus evidence a substantial, but oblique textual melancholia, then this melancholia started to become an increasingly explicit narrative concern by the end of the decade, in a stylistic trend which continued to develop into the thirties and forties. This changing literary treatment of melancholia by the end of the twenties is closely tied to a more general trend towards greater narrative directness and ultimately a more obviously confessional tone that has been widely observed in the writer's formally-inventive, idiosyncratic later works, especially *Youth Restored* and *Before Sunrise*.¹ However, as the current chapter will show, this new tone is not merely coincident with the increasingly explicit treatment of melancholia, nor is it merely an aspect of the former: the following analysis will suggest that Zoshchenko's new directness, something most obviously manifested in self-styled authorial intrusion, is in fact intimately linked with and, at least in part, an outgrowth of Zoshchenko's own attempts to understand his melancholic sufferings in text. In particular it will attempt to trace the textual echoes in Zoshchenko's later writing of a particularly violent

¹ This changed tone has been widely acknowledged, both by contemporary critics and more recent scholarship. For example, the contemporary literary critic Tsesar' Vol'pe, in his reading of *Youth Restored*, emphasised the new tone of sincerity, noting that Zoshchenko's reader was now encountering for the first time the "unknown face of a writer well-known to him" («неизвестное лицо известного ему писателя»). Ts. Vol'pe, *Isskustvo nepokhozhesti* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1991 [1941]), p.227). More recently, Jeremy Hicks has expressed a similar sentiment when he differentiates *Youth Restored*, *The Sky-Blue Book* and *Before Sunrise* from the stories of the twenties by noting "the creation of a more trustworthy, irony-free narrator figure" in the later works. He notes that "the effect" of this is greater "sincerity" on behalf of the authorial voice at the expense of an ambiguous *skaz* style which, for him, defines the earlier works (J. Hicks, *Poetics of Skaz*, p.8).

depressive relapse that shook the writer's health between autumn 1926 and summer 1927; the current chapter will reveal the way in which Zoshchenko's new, more overtly confessional voice can be seen tentatively emerging from under the rubble of this particular nervous collapse. In doing this, it will also attempt to show that this growing confessional voice is neither as stable nor as unambiguously monologic as is often assumed. It will argue that, when read in textual context, this self-conscious authorial voice can be understood, at one level at least, as a determined and genuinely innovative means of inscribing the melancholic experience into language. In this regard, it lends itself to interpretation as an earnest attempt to overcome that seemingly unbridgeable divide between language and affect that lies at the heart of the melancholic 'pallor of words'. Understood in this way Zoshchenko's late oeuvre in its entirety comes to resemble something of a Soviet language of melancholia: a discursive model for discussing subjective suffering in a culture in which such avenues were severely limited.

A Breakdown in Text

The period between the second half of 1926 and the first half of 1927 was an extremely important time in terms of Zoshchenko's creative development. As suggested above, it marks the point at which Zoshchenko's writing goes through something of a qualitative change in style, form and, perhaps most importantly, in narrative voice. Although this new voice remains recognisably Zoshchenko, there is increasingly less emphasis on the linguistic eccentricity, dissonant speech styles and formal authorial effacement that characterised his earlier fiction; Evgeniia Zhurbina affirms the date of this stylistic tipping point when she notes the more linguistically

neutral tone characterizing the writer's revisions of his stories after 1927.² Interestingly, the period 1926 to 1927 is not only significant in stylistic terms; it is an equally significant period in the life of the writer. For a good deal of 1926 and 1927 Zoshchenko was locked in a desperate battle to shore up his failing mental health. As Tomashevskii shows, the year 1926 opened for Zoshchenko with "a sharp decline in health" ("*rezkoe ukhudshenie zdorov'ia*"), which forced the writer to undertake no less than four vacations or stays in various sanatoria in the course of the next fifteen months.³ For 4 weeks in February 1926, Zoshchenko was confined to a sanatorium in Detskoe Selo, a small town near the former imperial palace south of Leningrad.⁴ Yet this was ultimately ineffective as he was forced to seek recuperation again between 14 and 28 August 1926, this time at a sanatorium in Sestroretsk on the north shore of the Gulf of Finland.⁵ Then, a mere 13 days after this second stay (on 10 September 1926) Zoshchenko embarked on a four week holiday to Yalta, in the course of which he sought "advice and help from a local psychotherapist."⁶ Yet this short intervention by the psychotherapist must have proved to be of limited use, for in April 1927, Zoshchenko experienced a serious breakdown during a Black Sea cruise taken with his family. This relapse was serious enough to cause Zoshchenko to cut short his trip at the Black Sea port of Tuapse and set off for Moscow alone, leaving his family to complete the scheduled cruise to the Caucasus without him.⁷

The coincidence between this stylistic turning-point in the work of the writer and his mental travails is striking but hardly conclusive; as a correlation between the life and work it does not necessarily amount to a causal relation. Moreover, it could

² E I Zhurbina, *Povesi' s dvumia siuzhetami: o publitsisticheskoi proze* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1974), pp. 144-145.

³ Iu V Tomashevskii, 'Khronologicheskaia kanva, p.346.

⁴ Ibid, p.346.

⁵ Ibid, p.346.

⁶ «В Ялте ищет совета и помощи у местного психотерапевта.» Ibid, p.346.

⁷ Ibid, p.347.

be equally objected that important changes in contemporary Soviet culture more generally at this time, not least the defeat of the United Opposition and the beginnings of the Stalin revolution, offer just as plausible an explanation for the changed tone of Zoshchenko's work.⁸ However, such an objection is surely mitigated by the fact that many of the works written after this period (including many of the most innovative) themselves gesture back to the writer's breakdown of 1926 to 1927, often with disarming frankness. In explaining the principles guiding the selection and omission of readers' letters in the preface to his *Letters to the Writer* (*Pis'ma k pisateliu*, 1929), Zoshchenko informs the reader in a footnote that:

[L]etters received prior to twenty-six have not been included here. These letters, to my great regret, have not been preserved. In these years I was in a state of pathological, neurasthenic irritation and destroyed all letters without replying.⁹

Thus, the documentary basis of this unusual work is explicitly traced by the writer himself back to 1926 and implicitly linked with his struggle for mental health. The implication perhaps is that the decision to keep letters received after 1926 marks, at the very least, the beginning of a new approach to his melancholia on the part of Zoshchenko, a new approach in which the epistolary word, if not the written word in general, played a role of the greatest importance.

This changed approach to his illness after 1926 is suggested in greater detail in the authorial 'Warning' (*Preduprezhdenie*) that opened the second part of Zoshchenko's *Of What the Nightingale Sang: Sentimental Tales* (*O chem pel solovei*:

⁸ It could be countered, however, that 1926-27 marked only the very earliest stages of the Stalinist revolution which really only became a mass cultural phenomenon with the instigation of the first Five Year Plan and the collectivization of agriculture.

⁹ «[С]юда не вошли письма, полученные мною до двадцать шестого года. Эти письма, к моему великому сожалению, не сохранились. В те годы я находился в болезненном, неврастеническом раздражении и уничтожал все письма, не отвечая.» *Pis'ma k pisateliu*, p. 330.

sentimental'nye povesti, 1927).¹⁰ The second part of this collection contained the tales 'Wisdom' ('Mudrost', 1924) and 'People' ('Liudi', 1924) which were kept separate from the other tales in early editions of the cycle for reasons connected with the writer's state of mind at the time of their original composition: "In that year [1924] the author was laid low by neurasthenia. Severe headaches, insomnia, hallucinations and a bad frame of mind prevented completion of work to the best of his strength."¹¹ The warning goes on to suggest:

Of course, the author is still ill with neurasthenia even now; however, not to such a degree as in 1924. From last year the author stopped going to doctors, stopped drinking bromide and taking pills, he weighed himself down with work again, and then he started getting better bit by bit. To be more precise, the author was able to organize his personality and his will afresh.¹²

Of What the Nightingale Sang was published in 1927, so the reference to "since last year" dates Zoshchenko's new, non-medicalized approach to his mental ill-health to 1926: in perfect accordance with both the biographical record and the similar suggestion cited above from *Letters to the Writer*. The sense in which this new approach to mental hygiene is intimately connected with his fiction is implied in the way that these two 'unhealthy' stories are separated off from the others, held in a kind of literary quarantine. Thus, the melancholic episodes of 1926 and 1927 are linked by the writer with stylistic evolution in the fictional works themselves.

¹⁰ This was the title of the first edition of what later became Zoshchenko's *Sentimental Tales* (*Sentimental'nye povesti*, 1927-29). Importantly the division of the tales into two parts was later abandoned and with it the authorial warning. The genesis of this collection of tales and details of its re-titling will be discussed in more depth later in this chapter.

¹¹ «В тот год автор заболел неврастенией. Тяжкие головные боли, бессонница, галлюцинации и дурное расположение духа мешали выполнить работу в полной силе.» М М Zoshchenko, *O chem. pel solovei: sentimental'nye povesti* (Moscow and Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1927), p.137.

¹² «Конечно, автор и сейчас еще болен неврастенией. Однако, не в такой степени, как в 24 году. С прошлого года автор перестал ходить по врачам, перестал пить бром и кушать пилюли, снова нагрузил себя работой и начал тогда полегоньку поправляться. Вернее, автор сумел снова организовать свой характер и свою волю.» Ibid, p.137.

The melancholic struggles of 1926 and 1927 receive their fullest description and play their most prominent part in the late work *Before Sunrise*. This prominence is underlined formally: the account of the 1926/27 breakdown in this part-autobiographical work is contained in the first chapter following the prologue and acts as the immediate impetus for, and indeed the opening gambit of, the subsequent anamnesis that makes up the first half of *Before Sunrise*. As the most recent recollection in the work, it therefore, depending on how one reads the rest of the progressively-regressive anamnesis that makes up the first half of the book, constitutes either the start-point or the end-point of all the other autobiographical recollections.¹³ It thus occupies a position of definitive importance in the structure of the work as a whole, implicitly linking the writer's mental health and creative practice. In view of all this clear textual direction, it is legitimate for the critic to seek illumination of the texts in the life of the writer.

The account of the 1926/27 breakdown in *Before Sunrise* is immensely important because it combines a remarkably close fidelity with the known biographical facts of the breakdown as outlined by Tomashevskii with a fascinating wealth of subjective detail.¹⁴ It is therefore worth looking at in some detail. Zoshchenko describes how the attack struck whilst he was recuperating in the Crimea,

¹³ *Before Sunrise* is an important and complex work which will be discussed in depth in chapter 7. The salient point here is the formal prominence afforded to the account of the 1926/27 breakdown.

¹⁴ The only deviation from the biographical record discernible in the account in *Before Sunrise* is a tendency to conflate the events of September 1926 and April 1927 into one experience. However, this is surely of minimal importance in an account which aims less at chronological detail *per se* than at sincere personal testimony. In any case, the conflation of these events in *Before Sunrise* perfectly communicates the way in which the illness seems to loom large in the mind of the suffering narrator, as well as the way in which the perception of time breaks down, something that, for Zoshchenko at least, is central to the melancholic condition itself. It is also important to note that although the biographical veracity of the account in *Before Sunrise* can be easily ascertained by modern scholars, such specific biographical details of the notoriously private Zoshchenko would not necessarily have been common knowledge for most of the contemporary readership of *Before Sunrise*. Thus, the work contains a surplus of verifiable autobiographical detail over what would have been required, in purely stylistic terms, to create a confessional effect for a contemporary readership. This surplus of requisite personal detail only strengthens the claim of the account to be the sincere testimony of a recalled trauma.

relaxing on the deck of a steamer that had sailed out of Yalta, losing himself in the scenery and sunshine of the Black Sea coast.

The sea was calm, placid. I had spent all day on deck admiring the coast of the Crimea and the sea which I loved so much and for whose sake I usually came to Yalta.¹⁵

Zoshchenko is here lapsing into a detached contemplation of reality, and, importantly, forcing it into the pattern of mental habit: making the view conform to the reasons for which he usually visits the Crimea. This abstracted, static contemplation of the scene continues and quickly leads to a more general erosion of temporal boundaries in which past and future, hope and reality merge into a dreamlike separation of self from world:

I was sitting on a deck chair enjoying my excellent state of mind. I was having the happiest thoughts, joyful even. I thought of my journey, of Moscow, of friends who would meet me there, of the fact that my sadness was now behind me. Let it remain a puzzle, only don't let it happen any more.¹⁶

Zoshchenko's mood darkens though as the impending breakdown sets in within the course of the next sentence:

Pensively, I looked at the gentle ripple of the water, at the patches of sunlight, at the seagulls, which, with a disgusting cry, were landing in the water.¹⁷

In the course of this one sentence the adjectives change from "gentle" to "disgusting"; what starts with pensiveness ends in the sharp intrusion of the repulsive shriek of seagulls and it is precisely at this point that nervous collapse ensues. What is

¹⁵ «Море было тихое, безмятежное. Я весь день просидел на палубе, любуюсь берегом Крыма и морем, которое я так любил и ради которого я обычно приезжал в Ялту.» *Pered voskhodom solntsa*, 3:460.

¹⁶ «Я сидел в шезлонге, наслаждаясь своим прекрасным состоянием. Мысли у меня были самые счастливые, даже веселые. Я думал о своем путешествии, о Москве, о друзьях, которых там встречу. О том, что тоска моя теперь позади. И пусть она будет загадкой, только чтоб ее больше не было.» 3:460-461.

¹⁷ «Задумчиво я глядел на легкую рябь воды, на блики солнца, на чаек, которые с омерзительным криком садились на воду.» 3:461.

interesting here is the gradual revelation of underlying motion and transience as the narrator focuses more and more on the details of the scene he is contemplating: the scene moves from broadly conceived static impressions of land and seascape to more dynamic play of wave and light and the momentary shriek of the seagull; thus the actual, chaotic dynamism of material reality gradually asserts itself through the narrator's static perception of it. The insistent movement of reality remorselessly undermines the narrator's limited and static understandings of the world and thus brings on the attack:

And suddenly, in a single moment, I felt bad. This was not just sadness, this was anguish, trembling, almost terror.¹⁸

The attack is sudden and terrifying, yet one suspects that, while surprising, it was also dimly anticipated. At one level, the tautological "and suddenly, in a single moment" communicates a vivid immediacy of recollection, but at another it perhaps simultaneously captures a paradoxical sense of surprised inevitability on the part of the narrator.

The key manifestation of this relapse appears to have been a debilitating lethargy and a frightening sense of powerlessness: "I could barely get up from the deckchair. I barely made it to the cabin. I lay motionless on the bunk for two hours."¹⁹ The simple and repetitive sentence structure here stands in marked contrast to the earlier lyricism; the language becomes labored in reflection of the melancholic lethargy that overcomes the narrator as well as evoking the steadily encroaching terror. The account describes how the sufferer tried desperately, but in vain, to distract himself and thus to fight against the attack by venturing out on deck and trying "to

¹⁸ «И вдруг в одно мгновение я почувствовал себя плохо. Эта была не только тоска. Это было волнение, трепет, почти страх.» 3:461.

¹⁹ «Я еле мог встать с шезлонга. Я еле дошел до каюты. Я два часа лежал на койке не двигаясь.» 3:461.

listen in to other people's conversations";²⁰ yet he ended up yielding to the attack and cutting the trip short. He thus found himself once again confined to his bed in a state of nervous exhaustion, this time in a hotel room in Tuapse. After a week of agonizing helplessness, he finally managed to recommence the long onward journey, finding that: "the road distracted and cheered me."²¹ It is interesting to note how the verb *rasseiat* 'is employed to communicate the sense of being cheered up. This verb can also communicate a sense of dispersal and, in an agricultural sense, means to sow. Thus the sentence carries the gentle, grammatical implication that the road somehow dispersed the narrator himself, somehow dispersed his very sense of self; and, as sowing, it perhaps brings to mind the start of the agricultural cycle, re-inscribing a sense of time and nurturing the precarious hope of a future abundance, or perhaps even just a future.

The account of the 1927 breakdown contained in *Before Sunrise* resonates interestingly with Zoshchenko's story 'The Earthquake' ('*Zemletriasenie*', 1929), written over a decade earlier. Although cast in a narrative voice approaching free indirect discourse, this story is similar in form to much of Zoshchenko's comic fiction of the twenties. It is set "at the time of the famous Crimean earthquake" of 11 September 1927 and recounts the misadventures of an itinerant cobbler called Snopkov.²² In many ways a typical Zoshchenko hero, Snopkov has settled in Yalta and, together with a partner in trade, undertakes shoe repairs from a small stall, drawing custom from both the local population and those attending the city's resorts and sanatoria. Always partial to hard liquor, after work on Friday 11 September 1927 Snopkov, "without waiting for Saturday, knocked back a bottle and a half of good old

²⁰ «Прислушиваться к разговорам людей»; 3:461.

²¹ «Дорога меня отвлекла и рассеяла.» 3:461.

²² «Во время знаменитого крымского землетрясения»; '*Zemletriasenie*', 1:441.

Russian vodka.”²³ Thoroughly inebriated, Snopkov sings and stumbles his way home, finally falling asleep in the yard under the stars. Whilst he sleeps and dreams, the earthquake strikes; yet the dozing drunk is oblivious to the shaking earth and falling masonry which “happen in parallel” with his dreamy slumber.²⁴ In fact: “Snopkov slept like a log and didn’t want to know anything.”²⁵ The hero wakes up with the coming of dawn and is utterly confused by his surroundings. Deciding that in his drunken state he must have wandered off somewhere, he immediately begins to berate himself for his drunkenness: “No, he thought, it’s a bad thing to get so completely plastered. Alcohol, he thought, is an extremely harmful drink; you can’t remember a damn thing afterwards.”²⁶ Yet this flurry of self-criticism does not prevent him easing his sufferings by finishing off the rest of the second bottle. In his weakened state, this latest intake goes straight to Snopkov’s head, and he embarks on an inebriated tour of his ruined, rubble-strewn neighbourhood. Not recognising anything and pondering the fact that everyone seems to be walking around in a state of undress, he wonders whether he has ended up in the tropics or perhaps unknowingly caught a steamer to Batum. Leaving the stricken city by the main road in an increasing fit of distress and self-recrimination, “he went on and on, and from overstrain and strong spirit he collapsed by the roadside and slept like the dead.”²⁷ Waking up cold, he discovers that his clothes have been stolen while he slept. Still utterly bemused, he only becomes aware of his actual situation when he seeks clarification from a passer-by on the road, who informs him of the earthquake he has lived through and explains that he has by now wandered 30 versts away from Yalta.

²³ «Не дождавшись субботы, выкушал полторы бутылки русской горькой.» 1:441.

²⁴ «Параллельно с этим происходит»; 1:441.

²⁵ «Снопков спит себе без задних ног и знать ничего не хочет.» 1:442.

²⁶ «Нет, думает, нехорошо так в дым напиваться. Алкоголь, думает, чересчур вредный напиток, ни черта в памяти не остается.» 1:442.

²⁷ «Шел, шел и от переутомления и от сильного алкоголя свалился у шоссе и заснул как убитый.» 1:443.

In spite of the prominence lent to it by the title, and the pivotal part it plays in the event structure, it rapidly becomes clear that the story is not really about “the famous Crimean earthquake” at all. ‘The Earthquake’ was first published in mid July 1929, almost two years after the seismic events it is set against.²⁸ Thus, as Alexander Zholkovsky has noted, the earthquake was hardly a topical event when the story first appeared.²⁹ This temporal distancing de-emphasises the earthquake as a documentary subject and narrows the reader’s attention to focus on the figure of Snopkov and his drunken travails. Interestingly, the historical earthquake did not take place on a Friday, as asserted in the story, but rather on a Monday. This factual lapse, otherwise irrelevant in a fictional work, is perhaps of interest for the way in which it highlights the importance for the story of the trauma striking at the point of relaxation for the hero, namely as Snopkov embarked early on his weekend drinking-bout. The significance of this becomes clearer when one remembers that Zoshchenko’s own Crimean trauma struck just as he began to relax into his Yalta holiday. The actual earthquake described in the story struck on 11 September 1927; that is exactly one year after Zoshchenko’s 1926 holiday to Yalta, for which he set out from Leningrad on 10 September 1926, and only four months after his later breakdown on the Black Sea steamer. This spatial and temporal proximity and the suggestive metaphoric similarity to Zoshchenko’s own ‘ground-shaking’ Crimean experience invite a retrospective re-reading of ‘The Earthquake’ in the light of the account of Zoshchenko’s own melancholic travails of 1927 as described in *Before Sunrise*.

Retrospective readings always demand caution, and yet in this case the build-up of tantalising textual detail seems to urge such an approach with an almost

²⁸ The story was published in the number 28 issue of the weekly journal *Revizor* for 1929. See Iu V Tomashevskii, “Primechaniia”, 1:550.

²⁹ «Свой рассказ Зошенко написал не по горячим следам ялтинского землетрясения.» А К Zholkovskii, *Poetika nedoveriia*, p.339.

plaintive persistence. For instance, Snopkov's suggestion of having perhaps inadvertently caught a steamer to Batum as a possible explanation of his unrecognisable surroundings after the earthquake, chimes imploringly with the fact that the traumatic breakdown Zoshchenko describes in *Before Sunrise* took place on the deck of a steamer bound for the same Black Sea port earlier in the same year as the earthquake. It is also interesting that the demon spirit which is Snopkov's downfall is referred to throughout the story using the colloquial locution "gor'kaia", the Russian adjective describing bitterness. As the story unfolds, this builds to the gentle implication that Snopkov becomes increasingly inebriated by indulging in bitterness: a bitterness which is an object in its own right, and thus, by implication, not related to a particular hurt or loss. This sense of bitterness beyond reason immediately recalls both those definitions of melancholia discussed earlier in this study which emphasised the condition as characterised by grief in excess of ostensible cause; and Zoshchenko's own characterisation of the condition in the chapter in which he recounts his Crimean breakdown as: "I'm unhappy and I don't know why."³⁰

Read from this perspective, Snopkov's drunkenness in 'The Earthquake' and Zoshchenko's melancholia in *Before Sunrise* function as metaphoric parallels. This allegorical equation of drunkenness and melancholia builds on a theme that has already been identified in Zoshchenko's comic fiction of the twenties (see chapter two); however, the crucial development in 'The Earthquake' is the way that this suggestive parallel is particularized in its reference to Zoshchenko's mental breakdown of 1926/27. Thus, as with those examples identified above in *Letters to the Writer*, *Of What the Nightingale Sang* and *Before Sunrise*, 'The Earthquake' makes comparable, albeit much more oblique, textual reference to this important event in the

³⁰ «Я несчастен – и не знаю почему.» 3:453.

life of the writer, only adding to the argument for the pivotal literary significance of the 1926/27 breakdown. The comparisons between Snopkov's drunken experience of the earthquake and Zoshchenko's melancholic collapse are not, however, limited to similarities of time, setting and narrative detail; it extends to a fundamental similarity in the protagonists' perception of their respective events in terms of an intrusive subjectivity attenuating the experience of an ever-changing external reality. The self-delusion and blunted perception that precede, and implicitly trigger, the breakdown described in *Before Sunrise* have already been suggested above, but this is also a marked aspect of Snopkov's seismic travails, something made manifestly clear when one follows the otherwise extraneous story of Snopkov's sober friend and partner in trade. Snopkov's partner, presumably with no extra benefit of foresight, recognised exactly what was happening as it happened, and "from the first shock" ("s pervogo udara") beat a hasty path to the municipal gardens in order to avoid falling rubble and the threat of after-shocks.³¹ Although at no less risk from the earthquake itself, the partner, through his temperance, is at least able to sense the changed environment and react to it in a logical way, rather than being distracted by his self-obsessions, delusions and mental prejudices into a costly and destructive personal odyssey.

In contrast, as we have already seen, the drunken Snopkov only "sleeps, sees various interesting dreams [...] and doesn't want to know anything".³² The drink fuels the cobbler's tragically harmful fantasy of being a spectator on reality. This is something perhaps more obvious in Russian, which routinely deploys a transitive construction to communicate the same sense as the intransitive English verb 'to dream'. Thus Snopkov "sees" his dreams: the dreams are a direct object of the spectator that he is grammatically posited as. Alcoholism here is indulged as a refuge

³¹ 1:442.

³² "Спит, видит разные интересные сны [...] и знать ничего не хочет." 1:441-442.

from reality, a means of positing an apparently static self abstracted from the surrounding environment. It will be remembered that the narrator of the story describes how the earthquake occurs “in parallel” with Snopkov’s drunken dreams. Yet this abstracted self, distanced as it is from the vicissitudes of the world, is without any basis in reality and, as Snopkov’s story shows, is as dangerous as it is absurd. It is precisely here that it bears marked similarities with the melancholic breakdown related by the narrator of *Before Sunrise*. As will be recalled from above, Zoshchenko’s Crimean breakdown is preceded by comparably detached contemplation of reality which similarly casts him as a detached spectator on a world from which he is in fact inseparable. Moreover, just like Snopkov, his trauma results from the inevitable intrusion of a recalcitrant reality into the carefully constructed, but fatally flawed, redoubt of private fantasy. Importantly, Zoshchenko also sought human interaction to break out of his lonely narcissism and to avoid the pull of depression, ultimately finding this escape on the road to Moscow. Similarly, Snopkov finally finds distraction from his fantastic and lonely self-delusion in the honest, if bemused, help of a passer-by on the main road out of town.

In a persuasive reading of ‘The Earthquake’, Zholkovsky points to thematic similarities and a number of close plot parallels between Zoshchenko’s story and Washington Irving’s 1819 short story ‘Rip Van Winkle’.³³ Both stories revolve around drink, falling asleep under trees and waking up to a completely changed landscape. ‘Rip Van Winkle’ was set at the time of the American Revolution, and it is the war with Britain and the eventual independence of the United States that constitute the changed environment that Rip encounters after waking from a twenty-

³³ *Poetika nedoveriia*, pp. 337-340.

year slumber that resulted from drinking the supernatural spirit offered by ghosts whom he encountered while wandering in the Catskill mountains outside New York. Zholkovsky argues that this intertextual connection with Irving's story functions to underscore, at a subtextual level, the way in which the radical disorder that so shatters Snopkov's inner peace is really the effect, as for Rip, of revolutionary change. In this respect, Zholkovsky asserts that "the earthquake, which displays a macrocosmic instance of 'disorder', serves for Zoshchenko as a metaphor of the [Russian] revolution."³⁴ There are certainly textual grounds to support such a reading. To Zholkovsky's observations could be added that Snopkov must have appeared to be something of an NEP relic by July 1929, at which time the whole country was caught up in the rush and excesses of the first Five Year Plan. During these heady days labour discipline and workforce turnover were becoming extremely hot topics; a drunken, itinerant cobbler operating a small, private enterprise from a ramshackle stall would hardly be in the spirit of the times. The story can therefore be read, at one level, as a parable of labour discipline and the personal transformation of an NEP relic against the backdrop of the revolutionary change ushered in by the Five Year Plan. Thus, after he has recovered from his trauma, Snopkov heads for Kharkov to effect a cure from alcoholism, pointedly choosing a large industrial city at the forefront of the industrialisation drive and the war on backwardness.

Yet, there is an additional way in which the intertextual structure that Zholkovsky has identified functions. Surely the central conceit which structures Irving's story is the suspension of time. When all is said and done, Rip is held in suspended animation for twenty years, in the course of which life, replete with death, war and revolution, continues as before regardless of his absence. This same

³⁴ «Землетрясение, являющее макрокосмический случай 'беспорядка', служит у Зошенко метафорой революции.» Ibid, p.166.

chronological disjuncture between the inebriated suspension of personal time and the onward march of historical time is crucial to the plot of 'The Earthquake'; if Snopkov's drunkenness is a narcissistic refuge from spatial reality, it is just as much a refuge from temporal reality as well. The cobbler's idiosyncratic, broken relationship with time explains the humorously achronological assertions that litter the story. For instance, despite the unforeseeable nature of the earthquake, we are told extraneously, and perhaps just a little plaintively, how when Snopkov embarked on his drinking bout: "he still didn't know that there would be an earthquake."³⁵ This attenuated sense of time is something encountered above in the account of Zoshchenko's breakdown, where, it will be remembered that, before the attack the narrator conflated past reminiscence, future plans and current events into an achronological lyricism. However, just as historical time asserts itself in Zoshchenko's breakdown, it cannot be ignored by Snopkov either.

And so it was on that day too. On the eleventh of September, right before the very earthquake, Ivan Yakovlevich Snopkov took his vodka, got resoundingly tipsy and dozed off under the very cypress in the yard.³⁶

Here, the juxtaposition of calendar accuracy with anachronistic prescience echoes the paradoxical sense of surprised inevitability, which, as noted above, accompanied Zoshchenko's experience of the breakdown in the account that appears in *Before Sunrise*.

There are other aspects to the equation of Snopkov's drunken experience of the earthquake and Zoshchenko's nervous collapse. Thus, it is important to note the way that alcohol leads Snopkov into an irresistibly deep, drunken slumber which echoes the debilitating lethargy and overwhelming sense of powerlessness that

³⁵ «Он еще не знал, что будет землетрясение.» 1:441.

³⁶ «Так и тут. Одиннадцатого сентября, в аккурат перед самым землетрясением, Иван Яковлевич Снопков набрался горькой, сильно захмелел и заснул под самым кипарисом во дворе.» 1:441.

characterised Zoshchenko's melancholic relapse. The phraseology is suggestive in this respect: the reader is told that Snopkov "slept like a log" ("*spit sebe bez zadnikh nog*"), literally "slept without hind legs"; the phrase '*bez zadnikh nog*' communicates a sense of immobility which in connection with sleep suggests a depth of slumber, but can equally be used to communicate immobility in other contexts as well such as physical exhaustion or fatigue. Additionally, both the drunk and the melancholic experience their respective debilities outside their homes: Zoshchenko in a hotel room and Snopkov under a cypress tree in the yard. Interestingly, the cypress tree, under which Snopkov lies in drunken incapacitation, has been a symbol of death and mourning from at least the time of the ancient Greeks. Thus Snopkov's drunken refuge from reality, much like the melancholic's, constitutes an unconscious embracing of death and the timeless oblivion of the underworld. These themes of death and senescence recall Zholkovsky's invocation of the intertextual connection with 'Rip Van Winkle'. Rip returns from his twenty-year hiatus to discover that his irksomely domineering wife has died and that he is now old enough to legitimately shun productive labour; in other words he has forgone middle age and passed directly into senility. That Snopkov is dallying with death is implied by his lying comatose under the cypress tree while buildings collapse all around him; however, it is also perhaps vaguely implicit in his name. Snopkov derives from the word *snop* meaning sheaf, which gently places the cobbler at the end of the agricultural cycle. Again it will be remembered that Zoshchenko's use of the verb *rasseiat'* to communicate his recovery from his relapse, in its meaning to sow, placed his recovered self at the start of a new agricultural year. Thus both Zoshchenko's melancholy and Snopkov's drunkenness are represented as a kind of ageing and ultimately associated with

finitude; the association of melancholia with aging, of course, was to be subsequently explored in much more depth in Zoshchenko's later work *Youth Restored*.

The dense, if often muted, parallels that link Zoshchenko's melancholic breakdown in *Before Sunrise* and Snopkov's drunken experience of the earthquake are, up to this point, precisely that: suggestive parallels kept apart by the distance that pertains from a retrospective reading. However, by the end of 'The Earthquake' these parallels come together in the intrusion of startlingly new presence: a voice purporting to be that of the author.

What does the author want to say with this artistic work? With this work the author is energetically making a stand against drunkenness. The sting of this artistic satire is aimed squarely against drinking and alcohol. The author wants to say that people who drink can blink and miss, not only more gentle things, but even an earthquake. Or as it says on one poster: "Don't drink! With drunken eyes you can embrace your class enemy!" It's as simple as that.³⁷

This jarring meta-literary intrusion seems, at first glance, to be a kind of authorial afterword whose explicit moral seeks to close the meaning of the text within a rigid satirical frame. However, in this aim it fails conspicuously, for, while the story can (and does) undoubtedly function as a satire of drunkenness, the reader is nonetheless left with a very real sense that the piece is not at all "as simple as that". In fact, this 'authorial' moral is much more complex than its tone of simple-hearted sincerity might suggest; shot through with knowing irony, it actually functions paradoxically to encourage the reader to look deeper than the limits of the concrete moral it proposes. The tendentious reference to the propaganda slogan is particularly important in this

³⁷ «Чего хочет автор сказать этим художественным произведением? Этим произведением автор энергично выступает против пьянства. Жало этой художественной сатиры направлено в аккурат против выпивки и алкоголя. Автор хочет сказать, что выпивающие люди не только другие более нежные вещи – землетрясение и то могут проморгать. Или как в одном плакате сказано: 'Не пей! С пьяных глаз ты можешь обнять своего классового врага!' И очень даже просто.» 1:443-444.

respect for it immediately begs the question of where on Snopkov's lonely, drunken odyssey he can be held to have embraced his "class enemy". Snopkov is actually his own worst enemy and if he has embraced his class enemy at any point in the story then the only realistic candidate for this counter-revolutionary malefactor is the hermetic sense of selfhood which he retreats into while drunk, and not any actual foreign spy, saboteur, or other putative 'enemy of the people'. If weakness for drink represents Snopkov's specific 'lack of vigilance', then it is the embracing of a narcissistic selfhood and the consequent disengagement from the world that is the real act of counter-revolution that is satirized in the story. It is at this point that the parallels between Snopkov's experience of the earthquake and Zoshchenko's melancholic breakdown come together: the retreat into selfhood that is common to both of them is satirized in the name of the revolution and in the voice of the author; this confluence of fiction and confession then deepens the disingenuously simple, comic moral, infusing it with a more personal and more melancholic cast.

What is perhaps the most interesting aspect of this authorial intrusion, however, is the meta-fictional confusion it introduces into the story. As Bakhtin has suggested, in literary fiction the author should always remain "on the boundary of the world he is bringing into being" because "his intrusion into that world destroys its aesthetic stability."³⁸ This is exactly what this intrusive authorial presence achieves: this new 'authorial' voice stands at a distinct remove from the free indirect discourse that had characterised the narrative voice up to this point and which, before the interruption, the reader had quite naturally assumed was attributable to the author; the studiously artless interruption by this new self-styled authorial voice thus represents an

³⁸ M M Bakhtin, 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity' in *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M M Bakhtin* trans. V Liapunov, ed. M Holquist and V Liapunov (Austin TX: University of Texas Press, 1990), p. 191. This work dates from the early twenties, but was never completed and was not published in Bakhtin's lifetime.

uncomfortable doubling of the authorial position in the work. That the authorial presence in the story is complicated in the course of a passage that, on the face of it, strives to close the text in line with indisputable 'authorial' intention, is a source of not inconsiderable irony. However, the scission that results from this interruption in the authorial voice is a crucial fictional effect: at one level the violent and unforeseen disruption to the coherence of the authorial voice and narrative flow constitutes an intriguing formal echo of the violent and unforeseen disruption wrought by the earthquake on the walls of both the cobbler's stall and his narcissistic self; at another level, however, when one recalls the parallels between the Crimean earthquake and Zoshchenko's Crimean breakdown adumbrated above, then this breakdown in the coherence of authorial voice becomes a formal parallel of the writer's nervous breakdown which is referred to metaphorically but so consistently throughout the story. This troubling passage can therefore be itself understood as a kind of textual breakdown, or a breakdown in text: the fractured authorial position which casts the ostensible authorial voice as a stranger to itself comes to function as a textual echo of the fractured selfhood and disjunctive subjectivity that characterize Zoshchenko's mental collapse of 1926 to 1927.

Authorship and Melancholy in *Sentimental Tales* (1927-1930)

This disjunctive authorial presence is developed further in Zoshchenko's *Sentimental Tales* (*Sentimental'nye povesti*, 1927-1930), where it is a sustained feature. When this cycle originally appeared in March 1927, it contained seven long tales that had all been published before, either separately or in collections, and bore the title of one of the constituent tales, *Of What the Nightingale Sang*, with the subtitle *Sentimental Tales* (*O chem pel solovei: sentimental'nye povesti*). The original title of the collection is particularly interesting, not least because in the tale of the same title attention is

deliberately drawn to the eponymous nightingale. At the end of 'Of What the Nightingale Sang' the narrator suddenly realizes that he "has completely missed out the nightingale that was so enigmatically mentioned in the title."³⁹ He thus hurriedly devises a retrospective narrative solution in which, during their walks in the woods at the highpoint of their romance, the heroine, "hearing the chirr of insects or the song of a nightingale" ("*slushaia strekot bukashek ili penie solov'ia*") would ask the hero: "Vasia, what do you think, what is that nightingale singing about?"⁴⁰ At first the hero ventures "with reserve" ("*sderzhanno*") that: "It's feeding he wants, that's why he sings" ("*zhrat' khochet, ottogo i poet*"), before later suggesting, partly in response to the romantic undertone of the heroine's question, that "the bird is singing about some kind of splendid life in the future" ("*ptitsa poet o kakoi-to budushchei rasprekrasnoi zhizni*").⁴¹ Importantly, this comic parody of bad writing and sentimental excess not only still leaves the significance of the eponymous nightingale open, but actually elevates the omission to a greater prominence, something particularly acute in early editions of the cycle when the nightingale purported to speak for the whole cycle.

The reader's interest in the nightingale must be stimulated further by the sheer density of symbolic weight adhering to this humble bird. Michael Ferber suggests that "the nightingale has had the most spectacular career of all literary birds", appearing "in many thousands of poems from Homer to the twentieth-century".⁴² Noting that "even in ancient times it acquired an almost formulaic meaning", Ferber shows how the bird became an emblem of "spring", "night", "mourning" and lament, and,

³⁹ «[...] совершенно упустил из виду соловья, о котором столь загадочно сказано было в заглавии.» *Sentimental'nye povesti*, 2:122-123.

⁴⁰ «'Вася, как вы думаете, о чем поет этот соловей?'» 2:123.

⁴¹ 2:123.

⁴² M Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), sv "Nightingale".

connected to a degree with all of these, “it also became a bird of love”.⁴³ This symbolism is important in understanding the eponymous nightingale in the work, especially when one remembers the extent to which the Rusanova-Zamyslovskaiia romance was written into many of the constituent tales of the collection (see chapter three) and when one recalls that work on the collection directly bisected the writer’s breakdown of 1926 to 1927, even being referred to directly in early versions of the cycle.

Yet Ferber also shows how the nightingale “became a metaphor for a poet” even in ancient times, “as early as Hesiod.”⁴⁴ This historical use of the nightingale as a symbolic evocation of poetic authorship is also identifiable in Russian literature. To cite a more or less contemporary example, towards the end of his 1918 poem beginning ‘What the clock-grasshopper sings...’ (*‘Chto poiut chasy-kuznechik...’* - published as part of his 1922 collection *Tristia*), Mandelstam equated the need to write poetry with being “in a nightingale fever” (*“v goriachke solov’inoi”*).⁴⁵ That the symbol holds for authorship in general, and not just poetic authorship, is evidenced by Chekhov’s use of the metaphor in his famous letter to the writer and lyric poet Yakov Polonskii of 18 January 1888. In this letter Chekhov, while working on his first long story *The Steppe* (*Step’*, 1888) and bemoaning the established literary prejudice against works not published in so-called “thick” journals, asks rhetorically: “Isn’t it just the same if a nightingale sings in a big tree or in a bush?”⁴⁶ Chekhov’s metaphoric equation of author and nightingale here is particularly applicable to *Of What the Nightingale Sang* in view of the fact that Zoshchenko’s reputation in 1927

⁴³ Ibid, sv “Nightingale”.

⁴⁴ Ibid, sv “Nightingale”.

⁴⁵ ‘Chto poiut chasy-kuznechik...’ in O Mandel’shtam, *Sochineniia: Stikhotvoreniia. Proza. Esse* (Moscow: AST, 2008), p. 85.

⁴⁶ «He все ли равно, поет ли соловей на большом дереве или в кусте?» А. Р. Chekhov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v tridsati tomakh: pis'ma v dvenadsati tomakh* (Moscow: Nauka, 1974-83), Pis'ma vol. 2, p.177.

likewise rested mainly on short, comic works widely considered to fall outside the boundaries of 'high' literature. Interpreted this way, Zoshchenko's title "Of What the Nightingale Sang" would thus seem to posit, albeit in a more belletristic mode, the same question posed by the blunter authorial intrusion we encountered above in the story 'The Earthquake': "What does the author want to say with this artistic work?" Thus the person of the 'author' is billed from the outset as significant presence, and, as the contemporary Soviet critic A G Barmin noted, he will become the central concern of the work.⁴⁷ Indeed, on opening the book, the voice of the putative 'author' is the first thing the reader in 1927 would have encountered in the form of a short preface. In Russian, the phrase "*bez predislovii*" (literally "without preface") communicates a desire for immediacy and saliency, akin to the English phrase "without further ado". That the figure of the 'author' emerges in a preface is thus telling, for his growing presence in the following tales will be increasingly digressive and interruptive, furnishing ever more 'further ado' as he quite literally gets in the way of the narratives he attempts to craft.

In view of the importance of the disruptive authorial voice in the collection, it is worth paying some attention to the preface in which the author-figure makes himself felt for the first time. He starts by warning the unwary reader of the work's dearth of affirmative revolutionary content; this is a work that, most assuredly, will not contain heroic tales of socialist construction, but rather: "This book is specially written about the little man, about the philistine, in all his unsightly beauty."⁴⁸ Moreover, in concerning itself with "the wretched, departing old life",⁴⁹ the 'author'

⁴⁷ A G Barmin, 'Puti Zoshchenko' in B V Kazanskii and Iu N Tynianov (eds), *Mastera sovremennoi literatury. Mikhail Zoshchenko: stat'i i materialy* (Leningrad: Academia, 1928), p.40.

⁴⁸ «Эта книга специально написана о маленьком человеке, об обывателе, во всей его неприглядной красе.» 2:6.

⁴⁹ «О жалкой уходящей жизни»; 2:7.

perceives a danger that the work may be read “as some kind of shrill, squeaking flute, some kind of insulting sentimental rubbish.”⁵⁰ Thus the ‘author’ acknowledges that this renders the work at odds with its time, and is keen to allay the anticipated ire of critics by pointing to the continued existence of such sentimental people and by insisting that he does not intend this book to stand amongst “the rank of witty and clever works of the epoch.”⁵¹ Whether contemporary Soviet critics chose to accept this explanation or not, and as will become apparent from the discussion below many did not, the anachronistic sense that the ‘author’ creates in the preface is of the utmost importance for when readers come to the tales themselves. All of the tales in the collection play heavily on temporal disparities to achieve their literary effects, and the theme of adaptation and adjustment to the times is one of the most prominent themes linking the various tales.

As discussed in the previous chapter, ‘The Nanny-Goat’ (*Koza*, 1923) recounts the ridiculously obsessive quest of a low-level government clerk called Zabezhkin to acquire ownership of a nanny-goat which he encountered while walking aimlessly around the outskirts of Petrograd. The story is a tragic-comic farce in which the hero’s narcissistic love for the goat leads to his progressive social marginalisation: he is first rejected in marriage by his landlady and evicted, before then losing his job and finally sinking into beggary. However, where the previous chapter focussed on the narcissistic nature of his obsessive love for the goat, what is important in the context of the current discussion is the way that this self-absorption disengages the hero from the realities of life in post-revolutionary Petrograd. It will be recalled from chapter three that Zabezhkin’s fixation with the goat was based on his belief that its acquisition would translate into material plenitude and personal sustenance free from

⁵⁰ «Какой-то визгливой флейтой, какой-то сентиментальной оскорбительной требухой»; 2:7.

⁵¹ «Автор не лезет со своей книгой в ряд остроумных произведений эпохи.» 2:6.

the need to work. This personal yearning for leisured dominion over hearth and home is profoundly at variance with the collectivist and production ethos of the time, summed up in the Marxian formula 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his need.' A sense of Zabezhkin's willed refusal to live in accordance with the times is evident in his perverse insistence on clinging to his place in the defunct imperial Table of Ranks; the chronologically confused clerk insists on introducing himself as a "former collegiate registrar" ("*byvshii kollezhskii registrator*") despite it being the lowest rung of the old civil service hierarchy and utterly irrelevant in the new Soviet order.⁵² In his refusal to accept the facts of post-revolutionary life, Zabezhkin, just like Snopkov in 'The Earthquake', effectively withdraws from reality into a narcissistic redoubt in which external reality becomes reconceived as an extension of self. In a perceptive reading of 'The Nanny-Goat', Andrei Siniavskii stresses the way in which the goat becomes some kind of extension of self for Zabezhkin: "For Zabezhkin, intimate, and I would say, lyrical attitudes arise with respect to the goat."⁵³ This lyrical bond which Zabezhkin tries to foster with the goat arises from his refusal to reform himself in relation to changed times and cultural landscape; however, no matter how heartfelt, his sentiments are meaningless and ineffectual defences against a reality that is totally indifferent to them.

The hero Belokopytov in the story 'People' ('*Liudi*', 1924), in contrast to Zabezhkin, seems at first glance to have appreciated the need for personal adaptation to changed post-revolutionary conditions. A former aristocrat and educated progressive, he returns from foreign exile to find that his clichéd pre-revolutionary role of repentant nobleman does not equip him for life in the new post-revolutionary

⁵² 2:21.

⁵³ «С козой у Забежкина завязываются интимные и, я бы сказал, лирические отношения.» А Siniavskii, 'Mify Mikhaila Zoshchenko', p.240.

reality that surrounds him. Moreover, after a depressingly fruitless search for work he comes to realize that his knowledge of Spanish and Latin amount to little more than a talking point in the Soviet provinces. After eventually obtaining an offer of temporary work at a cooperative, which is tellingly called 'The Common Weal' ('*Narodnoe blago*'), he realises the inadequacy of his old outlook and personal ideals, and seeks new ones in a promising view of life as a constant struggle for adaptation. However, before even starting his new job and applying his new personal outlook in real life, Belokopytov has already begun to raise it to the level of abstract philosophy:

He immediately and quickly developed a philosophical system out of it, about the imperative to adapt oneself, about ordinary and primitive life, about how every human being possessing the right to live is unavoidably obliged, just like every living being and every beast, to change its appearance depending on the times.⁵⁴

On the face of it, this confused and breathless revelation appears to be broadly positive. However, one suspects that constructing such an all-embracing abstract system of thought out of his untested epiphany is perhaps a little premature. Moreover, if the imperative is to change only one's external appearance (*meniat' svoiu shkuru*, i.e. literally to change one's skin) then one doubts how far reaching an adaptation is really being proposed. Is Belokopytov not just proposing window-dressing to cover up an unreformed soul, to adopt sheep's clothing to hide the wolf he really is? Sure enough, Belokopytov's new 'story' quickly turns out to be a paean to cynicism, as he declares:

[...] that cynicism is an absolutely imperative and normal thing in life, that without cynicism and cruelty not even a beast can get by

⁵⁴ «Он тотчас и немедленно развил им целую философскую систему о необходимости приспособляться, о простой и примитивной жизни и о том, что каждый человек, имеющий право жить, непременно обязан, как и всякое живое существо и как всякий зверь, менять свою шкуру, смотря по времени.» 2:75.

and that, perhaps, cynicism and cruelty are also the most correct things, which give the right to life.⁵⁵

Belokopytov thus renounces his old outlook in exchange for the violent, instinct-driven biological self that one suspects always lurked behind his former cultured mask. Yet this frighteningly bestial philosophy is no more suited to the new reality than his previous cultured ideals: its malign conclusions lead Belokopytov to steal from the cooperative in which he works and ultimately to be dismissed. Thus forced out from 'The Common Weal', and by implication alienated from society, Belokopytov still clings to his unrealistic outlook, following its logic to the apotheosis: degeneration to the level of a beast, an existence which, apart from the occasional charity of his landlady, places him firmly beyond the pale of human civilisation.

Nadezhda Mandelstam seems to argue that Belokopytov's choice of path represents Zoshchenko's recommendation and advice to the intelligentsia for living in the new regime.

Perhaps the reason Mandelstam liked Zoshchenko so much was because in one of his sentimental tales he describes a man who grows fur, digs himself a burrow in the forest, and howls like a wild animal – he had just not found it possible to live a simple human existence (let alone to try to write poetry!).⁵⁶

However, this reading of Belokopytov as a tragic, romantic hero finds little support in the text. That he is tragic is without doubt, but he is not at all heroic or exemplary. The new outlook he adopts is poorly adapted to the actuality of the cultural reality he

⁵⁵ «[...] что цинизм – это вещь совершенно необходимая и в жизни нормальная, что без цинизма и жестокости ни один даже зверь не обходится и что, может быть, цинизм и жестокость и есть самые правильные вещи, которые дают право на жизнь.» 2:77.

⁵⁶ «Не потому ли Мандельштам так любил Зошенко, что у него в сентиментальных повестях человек обрастает шерстью и роет нору в лесу, чтобы завывать зверем, и только потому, что пытался «построить» не лиру даже, а самую простую человеческую жизнь.» N Mandelstam, *Vtoraja kniga* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1972), pp. 342-343. Translation is a slight modification of that by Max Hayward in N Mandelstam *Hope Abandoned* (London: Collins Harvill, 1989), p. 304.

is trying to find a place in and thus results in his expulsion from society. Whatever the changed cultural conditions of the Soviet provinces may be, they are not quite the Hobbesian state of nature that Belokopytov decides they are. That this new, but ill-adapted personal outlook is ironically arrived at through embracing a philosophy of adaptation only heightens the tragedy of Belokopytov's fate and exposes the limitations of abstract reasoning and classical philosophising where there is no concept of 'the common weal'. Moreover, just as in the case of Zabezhkin, Belokopytov's choice of personal outlook at variance with external reality represents no more than a stubborn attempt to project an unchanged, and unchanging, subjectivity onto the external world with the resultant alienation which that inevitably incurs.

The apparently relentless tragedy in these tales of heroes who either resist or otherwise fail to adapt to post-revolutionary life is supposed to find some relief with the last story in the collection. The tale is entitled 'A Merry Adventure' ('*Veselo prikliuchenie*', 1926) and readers had been reassured in the preface that:

There is cheerfulness here [in *Of What the Nightingale Sang*]. Not in excess, of course, but it is there. The very last pages of the book positively gush with unbounded cheerfulness and sincere joy.⁵⁷

Although ultimately not as uplifting as either its title or its advance billing might suggest, this tale is markedly different to those which precede it. Firstly, the hero, a certain Sergei Petrovich Petukhov, is a young man of twenty-five years who, by the time the story was first published in 1926, would have had little pre-revolutionary baggage to divest himself of. He is happy and healthy, and when he smiles at the sun rising on another languid, youthful Sunday:

⁵⁷ «Бодрость тут есть. Не через край, конечно, но есть. Последний же страницы книги прямо брызжут полным весельем и сердечной радостью.» 2:7.

This was the smile of a young, healthy organism, not yet pawed by doctors. This was the smile of a youth, having dreamed good dreams at night of bright vistas and cheerful horizons.⁵⁸

Even his name, from the Russian word for cockerel, associates him with strutting cockiness and the hopeful dawning of a new day. And, like the cockerel, his first waking thoughts on a lazy Sunday turn to the pursuit of the opposite sex. Walking the streets in search of a female companion he comes across a promising candidate and, predictably enough, love follows with the arrangement of an assignation in the local cinema later that day. Yet there is a fly in the romantic ointment even at this earliest of stages. In his amorous quest, Petukhov is not so much looking for love as, quite literally, looking for the woman of his dreams. He follows women in the street and watches them askance, "as if evaluating and comparing them with those outstanding ladies which he had seen that night" in his dreams.⁵⁹ When he finds his girl there is no love at first sight as a truly sentimental tale might have required; rather it turns out that Petukhov has met up with this girl many times before. On this occasion, it is only "under the influence of his light, cheerful dream and the cheering weather" that Sergei begins to sense the stirring of amorous feelings.⁶⁰ If this is love, it is most certainly of the most incidental and narcissistic kind and bearing little or no resemblance to any sentimental or romantic ideal.

However, problems of a more material kind soon beset the hero as it emerges that he does not have sufficient money left over from his wages to cover the cost of the cinema tickets. With this realisation the hero's buoyant mood swiftly evaporates

⁵⁸ «Это была улыбка молодого, здорового организма, не захватанного еще врачами. Это была улыбка юноши, видевшего ночью отличные сны, светлые перспективы и бодрые горизонты.» 2:126.

⁵⁹ «Как бы оценивая и сравнивая с теми выдающимися барышнями, каких он видел этой ночью»; 2:128.

⁶⁰ «Под влиянием легкого, веселого сна и бодрящей погоды»; 2:128.

as he sinks “into intense sadness”.⁶¹ Eventually, he resolves to sell some possessions, and frantically begins to search out any items of value he may possess. After an exhausting search, he reluctantly settles on a dusty meat grinder that has been left to him by his late mother. This beautiful, and devastatingly incongruous, comic image is a classic Zoshchenko construction which captures in perfect condensation the hero’s complicated relations with his mother; both alimentary and destructive, both nurturing and crushing, both banal and violent. Yet, apparently oblivious to both the incongruity of the object and the dense psychological symbolism, Petukhov sets of to sell his late mother’s meat grinder in order to yield enough cash to pursue his new found love, quite literally exchanging it for a new mother-figure. Tellingly, it transpires that he has greatly over-estimated the value of the maternal meat grinder and once it is sold he still remains short of the required funds for his amorous rendezvous. Increasingly anxious, Petukhov finally remembers an elderly aunt, whose favour he enjoys and who could in all likelihood extend him the balance. At this thought his “previous good spirits and cheerfulness enveloped Sergei Petrovich’s whole being.”⁶²

However, his joy is again short-lived, for on arriving at his aunt’s flat he discovers that she has already lain on her death-bed for two weeks, unable to talk or move. At this news “Sergei Petrovich’s heart sank”.⁶³ Having seen his aunt’s wasting body, the hero’s mood darkens still further to the point of a “nervous fever”.⁶⁴ Importantly, the cause for this depressive episode is not simply reducible to distress at the imminent loss of his aunt, for:

⁶¹ «В сильных грустях»; 2:132.

⁶² «Прежняя бодрость и веселье охватили все существо Сергея Петровича.» 2:135.

⁶³ «У Сергея Петровича совершенно упало сердце.» 1:136.

⁶⁴ «Нервная лихорадка»; 1:136.

He did not pity his dying aunt. At the time he did not even begin to think of her. He only thought about how now there would be absolutely no chance to borrow money from her.⁶⁵

This troubling indifference to the suffering of his indulgent aunt serves only to underline the sense in which Petukhov's obsessive pursuit of his private fantasies has detached him from the world. His depression and anxiety are narcissistic responses to the imminent disappearance of a customary source of female support and income. As with the poignant image of the maternal meat grinder from earlier in the story, Petukhov is here faced again by the prospect of a world without a nurturing and supportive mother-figure, or symbolic substitutions thereof. His aunt's demise and the financial complications that seem certain to scupper his amorous pursuit of another mother-substitute leave him to face the cold indifferent reality of a material world at odds with his fantasised conception of it. As his stiflingly subjective outlook crumbles, Petukhov is confronted by a reality stripped of all fantasy which is increasingly resistant to any kind of meaning at all. The moment before his nervous collapse, Petukhov leaves his dying aunt's room and enters the kitchen of her apartment where he encounters a devastatingly sparse vignette of existence cut down to the barest of bones:

Two women, out of respect for his unendurable suffering, were trying not to move at all; they only sighed soundlessly and wiped their lips and eyes with the corners of their shawls. There was almost complete silence. Only the boy, as before, chomped potato, coarsely smacking his lips. And, as before, the kitchen clock rhythmically beat out the passage of time.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ «Ему не было жаль умирающей тетки. Он даже в те минуты и не подумал о ней. Он только подумал о том, что сегодня решительно нет никакой возможности призанять у нее денег.» 1:136.

⁶⁶ «Две женщины, из уважения к его нестерпимому горю, старались даже не двигаться, они только беззвучно выдыхали и вытирали кончиками платков свои губы и глаза. Стояла почти полная тишина. Только один парнишка по-прежнему, грубо чавкая, жрал картофель. И по-прежнему кухонные часы мерно отбивали движение времени.» 2:136.

The abiding impression of this scene is of a terrifyingly detached physicality, mechanical movement, bodily and temporal, not even enlivened by a glimmer of warmth, human empathy or shared mourning. The old women, whose indifference to the aunt's death is expressed in their earlier reluctance to get involved in funeral arrangements because "they don't have time to work selflessly without knowing who for", can only respect Putukhov's 'unendurable suffering', they cannot share it.⁶⁷ Moreover, they completely misinterpret this suffering, for we have already seen that Petukhov's grief is more connected with his stifled narcissistic fantasy than a response to mourning the unexpected death of a relative. Thus we have a scene of awkward, mutual misapprehension devoid of even the faintest flicker of redeeming empathy, set against the youthful indifference of the hungry boy and the relentless passage of time.

Although the old women try not to move in the silence of the tableau above, the scene is fundamentally destabilised by persistent noise, movement and transience from within its very confines: the wiping of bodily fluids with shawls, the smacking of lips and the beating out of time. This startling passage rings like a hammer-blow through the empty sentiment of Petukhov's fantasies. It is a moment in which the Real, in something like a Lacanian sense, breaks through the narcissistic structure of the self, leaving only a shattered shell of subjectivity to which no human meaning can adhere. This profound absence of meaning, fantastical or otherwise is a profoundly melancholic vision; it is a metaphysical void representing the complete absence of outlook. In this it is not at all like Belokopytov's bestial war of all against all; in fact it is much more frightening. This is a banal tragedy that has somehow been denuded of the Tragic, leaving only the melancholic as a kind of sludgy precipitate left in the absence of an effective narrative or symbolic solvent. In the face of this terrifying

⁶⁷ «У них нету времени бескорыстно работать неизвестно для кого»; 2:136.

insight, the breakdown strikes: "Sergei Petrovich [Petukhov] gave a loud sigh, stole a sidelong glance at the ticking clock and froze in complete and total numbness."⁶⁸

That he is looking askance at the clock is important because the narrative structure of 'A Merry Adventure' is essentially chronological. From the point at which Snopkov sets up his meeting with the girl, the clock is, quite literally, ticking as he scurries about in an increasingly desperate struggle to collect the funds he needs to take her to the cinema. Everywhere Petukhov looks there are ticking clocks which herald the remorselessly approaching deadline. As he stands in the marketplace touting his maternal meat grinder: "he unexpectedly glanced at the clock in the marketplace and fell into a flat panic" as he realises that it is already a quarter to four.⁶⁹ A few lines later, when desperation at the gallop of time has forced him to let the meat grinder go for a fraction of its sentimental value, he is again struck by the time: "having looked again at the clock, he groaned" when he realised that it was now four in the afternoon.⁷⁰ At one point in his desperate adventure Petukhov even stops outside a shop selling clocks, and "looked long at the white, round face of a clock placed in the window."⁷¹ Chronological time functions as an interrupting force that perpetually intrudes on and punctures Petukhov's sentimental excesses. For example, when Petukhov hits on his aunt as a potential source of income, his joy is such that "he started to dance some kind of wild African dance".⁷² However, this maniacal joy quickly dissipates as he enters the kitchen of his aunt's apartment to find, amongst other things, a ticking clock:

⁶⁸ «Сергей Петрович, шумно вздохнув, искоса посмотрел на тикающие часы и замер в совершенном и окончательном оцепенении.» 2:136.

⁶⁹ «Неожиданно он глянул на рыночные часы и пришел в совершенный ужас.» 2:134.

⁷⁰ «Взглянув еще раз на часы, охнул»; 2:134.

⁷¹ «Долго глядел на кругленький циферблат часов, выставленных в окне.» 2:138.

⁷² «Он стал танцевать какой-то дикий африканский танец»; 2:135.

On the wall by the stove a huge quantity of cockroaches was running about, an iron clock with weights hung by the window. The pendulum was swinging with terrifying speed and wheezing; with a screech it beat out the time of a cockroach life.⁷³

Here chronological time gains an existential colouring: the “cockroach life” of which it beats out the time potentially being either the life of the insect, or a bitterly pejorative reflection on existence in general. Meanwhile, the wheezing sound of the swinging pendulums foreshadows Petukhov’s dying aunt, whom Petukhov will discover several lines later as she “lay motionlessly on the bed, breathing heavily and wheezily.”⁷⁴ Chronological time and existential finitude are thus explicitly married in the image of the heavy, iron kitchen clock, which is intrinsic to the sparse, cold tableau which marks the onset of Petukhov’s nervous collapse. In fact, it is time that incessantly punctures Petukhov’s flights of sentimental fancy, creating the violent fluctuations between lyrical joy and morbid sadness that characterise the hero’s passage through the story. The difference between static sentimental time and remorselessly transient chronological time, as well as Petukhov’s perpetual surprise at the passage of the latter bring to mind the attenuated sense of time and the strange sense of surprised inevitability that characterised both Snopkov’s seismic travails and Zoshchenko’s Crimean breakdown encountered earlier in this chapter.

However, this is not the only source of similarity between Zoshchenko’s, Snopkov’s and Petukhov’s respective collapses. There is a wealth of incidental similarity: like Zoshchenko and Snopkov, the young Petukhov experiences his relapse outside his home, at his aunt’s apartment; like Zoshchenko and Snopkov, the attack eventually forces him to take to his bed. But perhaps the most important similarity between each of these cases is the way that each collapse arises from the failure of the

⁷³ «На стене перед плитой в громадном количестве бегали тараканы. У окна висели железные часы с гирями. Маятник качался со страшной быстротой и хрипло, со скрежетом отбивал такт тараканьей жизни.» 2:135.

⁷⁴ «Тетка неподвижно лежала на кровати, тяжело и хрипло дыша.» 2:136.

narcissistically constructed self to contain all the forces of, and withstand the onslaught of, a radically dynamic reality which ultimately exceeds the explanatory power of any personal outlook, however philosophically considered. Petukhov, like Zoshchenko and Snopkov, indeed, like most of Zoshchenko's hero's in *Sentimental Tales* and in the wider comic short fiction, in doggedly pursuing his private concerns, pits his own subjective outlook and private fantasy against an indifferent reality with a predictably tragic outcome. Petukhov acknowledges this as he struggles against his impending nervous collapse. He struggles to understand why such a banal concern as losing a girl for lack of money should jeopardise his state of mind to such a degree. He is even aware of the ridiculousness of his plight, for: "Sergei grinned despairingly and rebuked himself for his unrealistic approach to events."⁷⁵ Yet, just like Snopkov, who goes on to finish off the second bottle of vodka after just declaiming the harmfulness of alcoholism, Petukhov is strangely unable to let go of his obsession due to "some kind of obstinacy".⁷⁶ His private search for a mother-substitute as it manifests itself in the struggle to acquire enough money to keep his date with the girl seems to loom large in his conscious mind, to the point in fact where: "It seemed that in this now lay the whole meaning of life."⁷⁷ This stubborn, neurotic, willed contraction of the myriad variety of external reality to the stuff of private psychological obsession is what really lies behind Petukhov's sufferings.

This neurotic obstinacy leads the young hero into a cycle of increasingly ridiculous ideas. He dreams of finding a wallet full of cash, of scaring a shopkeeper and stealing the goods while he is distracted, and even of driving the cashiers at the State bank into

⁷⁵ «Сергей безнадежно усмехался и упрекал себя в нереальном подходе к событиям.» 2:137.

⁷⁶ «Какое-то упрямство»; 2:137.

⁷⁷ «Казалось, что в этом сейчас заложен весь смысл жизни.» 2:137.

the toilet and taking “a whole sack of ten kopek pieces.”⁷⁸ As if stealing low denomination coins from a bank was not ridiculous enough, Petukhov finally resolves to break into his aunt’s apartment and steal from her, apparently oblivious to the fact that in stealing from his dying aunt he is, as the sole heir, effectively stealing from himself. Nonetheless, he approaches his aunt’s apartment and steels himself for the crime. After overcoming a locked door and hiding from one of the old ladies in a dark stairwell, the increasingly agitated Petukhov finally enters his aunt’s apartment. But again struck numb with fear by the wheezing body of his dying aunt, Petukhov knocks over a medicine phial and a spoon. Hearing the other old lady approaching, the thief beats a hasty, empty-handed retreat. This episode, with its locked doors and brooding stairwells, its dark corridors and old ladies, and the febrile self-consciousness of the criminal, is reminiscent of Raskolnikov’s murder of the old money-lender in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* (*Prestuplenie i nakazanie*, 1866). However in a bathetic denouement, Petukhov, rather than murdering the old ladies, knocks one of them over while fleeing the scene in panic. The last thing Petukhov hears as he leaves the building is the horrified scream of the injured old woman: “her cry resonating around the whole building”.⁷⁹ Just as in the account of Zoshchenko’s Crimean breakdown where the “disgusting cry” of a seagull heralds the onset of a depressive relapse, so the cry of the old woman signals the onset of a worsening mood for the hero of ‘A Merry Adventure’. By now the deadline has passed, and Petukhov has returned home defeated and downcast, as “like a shadow he entered his room.”⁸⁰ His oppressed mood is only deepened as “he mentally pictured the dismayed face of the girl, waiting for him for an hour or more.”⁸¹

⁷⁸ «Полный мешок гривенников»; 2:137.

⁷⁹ «Крик ее гулко разнесся по всему дому»; 2:139.

⁸⁰ «Он как тень прошел в свою комнату.» 2:140.

⁸¹ «Он мысленно представил себе растерянное лицо девушки, ждущей его час и более.» 2:140.

The following morning, Petukhov is woken from a restless night's sleep by the old woman he knocked over the previous night. In a continuation of the Raskolnikov motif, Petukhov is convinced that the old woman has come to confront him over his crime. However, to Petukhov's intense relief, it turns out that she did not recognise him in the darkness and has come to inform him that his aunt passed away in the night and that he has now inherited her estate. For Petukhov this waking to a new day represents the evaporation of the immediate source of his melancholic frustrations from earlier in the story. Indeed, his aunt's death has provided the young hero with enough ready cash to pursue his beloved and, in addition, an incontrovertible excuse for missing his date of the previous night, for what girl could really begrudge the presence of a faithful nephew at his beloved aunt's deathbed? After a whirlwind romance the pair marry two weeks later and their joy is cemented when they eventually win twenty roubles on the state lottery with a ticket inherited from Petukhov's dead aunt: "Their joy knew no bounds."⁸²

The reader anticipating the happy ending predicted in the preface could well have been disappointed for there are ample grounds to doubt the completeness of the happiness that awaits the hero and his beloved. Firstly, this happiness is earned at the expense of the miserable and lingering death of the hero's aunt for whom no redemptive joy accrues; moreover, Petukhov's cold indifference to this must surely send a shiver down the spine of most readers. Secondly, although he gets the girl in the end, the preceding story suggested that Petukhov's pursuit of his beloved owed more to narcissistic fantasy than to any ideal of romantic love. Indeed, understood from this angle, the ending, whether momentarily happy or not, merely represents a progression in the same neurotic obsession that caused the hero such distress, and

⁸² «Радости их не было границ.» 2:144.

even nervous collapse, earlier in the story. But perhaps most damningly, although the young couple's happiness may seem boundless in the final moments of the story, this happiness is in actuality bounded in one obvious and very important sense: that of time. In a story where the effluxion of time is so carefully recorded and so implicated in the interruption of the hero's bouts of sentimental joy, one feels that Petukhov is perhaps experiencing a joy that is decidedly temporary; all the more so, in fact, because he has ceased glancing at the clock at all. The last five lines of the story cover six months of activity, compared to the forty-eight hours covered by the whole preceding tale. The ending achieved through this fragile textual frame, which seems so rushed and improvised, feels like a sentimental lapse, another retreat into the fantastic, dangerous, timelessness of the imagination.

Lesley Milne convincingly portrays this hugely compromised happy ending as a playful satire on the demands, both popular and official, for cheerful literary content.⁸³ However, alongside this satirical aspect there is also a sense in which the happiness of the ending is real beyond the author's forced and clumsy sentimental frame. What the tale reveals is that joy and despair are human creations, sentimental constructions which are projected onto times, events or people whose objective existence is really emotionally neutral. Petukhov's alternating elation and depression derive from projecting his limited subjective outlook and his narcissistic fantasies onto events that sometimes facilitate and sometimes impede them. Thus, his essentially stable narcissistic self experiences lacerating existential misery when his plans are thwarted and is engulfed by hyperbolic joy when the money suddenly becomes available; crucially however, the event structure remains absolutely neutral. Thus, that the tale has ended on a high note is no guarantee of lasting happiness, just

⁸³ L Milne, *Zoshchenko and the Ilf-Petrov Partnership*, pp. 50-51.

as its ending on a low note would have been no guarantee of intractable misery. The joy at the close of the story derives from the fact that the story of Petukhov has not actually closed at all, for the porous frame that the author has established around it fails to contain the chronologically-based, narrative dynamic established early in the story; the reader's speculative attention at the end is thus irresistibly drawn to the joys and sadness that await the 'happy' couple beyond the author-figure's flimsy sentimental attempt at closure.

Any lasting happiness that cleaves to this tale does so at a meta-fictional level; it is really more for the figure of the author, and perhaps for a certain kind of reader, than it is for Petukhov and his beloved. Indeed it is the author figure that insists on the happiness of the story and, in order to understand why, one needs to reflect on the author figure's own professed proclivity to melancholia. At the start of the story, in the context of a rambling introduction to the tale narrated in the voice of the author-figure himself, he confesses that:

The author too has recently been setting himself to the most desperate and melancholic ideas and to the resolution of the most unthinkable questions. But that's enough. Quite enough. There is no happiness in this, and there is no wisdom either.⁸⁴

'Wisdom' ('Mudrost', 1924) is in fact the title of the story in *Sentimental Tales* that deals most explicitly with 'melancholic ideas'. In editions before 1931, the central character of the tale was called Zotov and the piece had a contemporary setting, however, in publications from 1931 onwards the hero is renamed 'Ivan Alekseevich Zoshchenko', a "relative" ("rodstvennik") of the author, and the action is

⁸⁴ «Автор и сам недавно еще задавался на самые отчаянные и меланхолические идеи и на разрешение самых немислимых вопросов. И вот – хватит. Довольно. Не в этом счастье. И не в этом мудрость.» 2:125.

re-set to before the revolution.⁸⁵ Lesley Milne has noted that the story can be read as “a caricature of the depression against which [Zoshchenko] put up a constant struggle”.⁸⁶ In the tale, the hero has spent the last eleven years in self-imposed isolation, shunning all human contact; significantly, the clock stops in his apartment one day, and a “waft of death” (*veianie smerti*) covers everything.⁸⁷ Then, “without any evident reason” (*bez vsiakoi vidimoi prichiny*) he wakes up full of life and vigour and realises that he has been “stupid” (*glup*): “Wisdom lies not in despising people but in doing the same trivial things as they do.”⁸⁸ Accordingly he arranges a supper party to celebrate his “renewal” (*obnovlenie*);⁸⁹ he even decides to invite those friends and acquaintances “who were still alive” (*ostavshikhsia pri zhivyykh*).⁹⁰ He plunges into feverish activity, cleaning and tidying, rearranging the furniture and buying the food. Exhausted and sweating, breathing heavily and with hands shaking, he is putting the finishing touches to the table decorations when he knocks the scissors to the floor. Bending down to pick them up, he touches their “cold steel” (*kosnyvshis' uzhe pal'tsami kholodnoi stali*) and dies of a heart attack.⁹¹ His friends when they arrive are greeted by his elderly aunt, whose dress is reeking of mothballs. Thus the epiphany of ‘wisdom’ – to be like other people and do the same trivial things as they do – is a false epiphany, in that it retrieves him from a living death only to deliver him up to death itself. The false epiphany links ‘Wisdom’ with ‘People’, the other tale that was kept separate and furnished with that ‘warning’ as to the writer’s state of mind in 1924. In neither case is an adaptation of behaviour successful.

⁸⁵ See Iu Tomashevskii, ‘Primechaniia’, 2:472; see also *O chem pel solovei*, p. 141.

⁸⁶ L Milne, *Zoshchenko and the Ilf-Petrov Partnership*, p. 50.

⁸⁷ 2:50.

⁸⁸ «Мудрость не в том, чтобы людей презирать, а в том, чтобы делать такие же пустяки как и они»; 2:52.

⁸⁹ 2:53-54.

⁹⁰ 2:52.

⁹¹ 2:56.

By contrast, 'A Merry Adventure' seems to be 'merry' in so far as it appears to offer a way out. For one so prone to melancholia, the realization that neither sadness nor joy need be unending and that neither has an objective basis in external reality must be breathlessly liberating; the example of Petukhov suggests that the way out of the slough of despond is endurance until such time as events take a more fortuitous turn. The key aspect of this fragile hope is a sense of futurity and an openness to external reality. Importantly, Petukhov displays no greater subtlety of psychological approach, and substantially less reflection on the nature of reality, than any of the heroes of the other tales in the collection; his chief virtue is his greater readiness to surrender himself to the course of events, unimpeded by philosophical reflection or fear of life. The tragedy in the tales of Zabezhkin and Belokopytov derives from the fact that their respective outlooks constituted attempts to either escape from or to control external events which closed them off from life; but most importantly, what made their tragedies irrevocable was the absence of future possibility that results from the implied death of both protagonists. In 'Wisdom' in particular, the protagonist's life is cut off before our eyes by the "cold steel" of the scissors. The significance of Petukhov's virile youth is thus as much thematic as it is an aspect of characterisation; it signifies an attitude of becoming which looks to the potential and possibility in events rather than a senescence that focuses on the tragic end-point of life. This theme of hopeful youth and melancholic senescence was to receive much more explicit treatment in the later *Youth Restored*.

This tentative, but genuine glimmer of hope sets 'A Merry Adventure' apart from the other tales in the collection. As the end of the cited passage above suggests, it is associated with a change in the attitude of the author-figure towards themes of joy and sadness. The author-figure himself acknowledges this changed attitude quite

explicitly at the opening of 'A Merry Adventure' and as he nears the end of his *Sentimental Tales*:

And now, as the author is finishing his book, he is starting to reflect sadly, that the whole book has been written not as it should be. But just what can be done? From now on the author will take it upon himself to tell only bright, cheerful and entertaining stories. From now on the author disavows all his dismal thoughts and melancholic moods.⁹²

This passage appears in the original version of the story which appeared as a stand-alone piece in the magazine *Prozhektor* in December 1926.⁹³ The reference to "finishing his book" can only be a reference to *Of What the Nightingale Sang*, the first edition of which came out in March of the following year; this means that the story, unlike the other tales in the collection, was written specifically as a conclusion to the final collection, something made explicit in the original magazine title of the story: 'A Merry Adventure (the Seventh and Last Sentimental Tale)'.⁹⁴ This development in the attitude of the author-figure by the close of the collection is important to note because it influences any attempt to try and make sense of the meaning of the disjunctive authorial voice that interjects throughout the work. In fact, as suggested by the nightingale that originally titled the whole collection, the author-figure himself is one of the most important parts of the work; as Lesley Milne has noted, he becomes a more and more "dominant" presence as the tales progress.⁹⁵ Yet in spite of his growing presence, the voice of the author-figure remains a source of curiosity and even discomfort for the reader, particularly in terms of his relationship to the writer of

⁹² «И теперь, когда автор заканчивает свою книгу, он приходит к грустному размышлению о том, что вся книга написано не так, как надо бы. Но что же поделать? Отныне автор берется рассказывать только бодрые, веселые и занимательные истории. Отныне автор отрекается от всех своих мрачных мыслей и меланхолических настроений.» 2:125.

⁹³ See M M Zoshchenko, 'Veseloe prikluchenie (sed'maia i posledniaia sentimental'naia povest')', *Prozhektor*, No. 23 (1926), p.12.

⁹⁴ 'Veseloe prikluchenie (sed'maia i posledniaia sentimental'naia povest')', *Prozhektor*, No. 23 (1926), pp.12-15 and No.24 (1929), pp.10-13.

⁹⁵ L Milne, *Zoshchenko and the Ilf-Petrov Partnership*, p.53.

the stories. In the first edition of the collected tales there was little explicit indication that the textual figure of the author was to be regarded as separate from the M M Zoshchenko whose name adorned the cover. Indeed, this uncomplicated confessional reading was adopted by some contemporary critics who failed to grasp the disjunctive peculiarities of the author-figure which emerge across the collection, and in particular the doubled authorial voice noted earlier. An important contemporary review of the book published in *Izvestiia* in August 1927 assumed that writer and the author-figure could be simply equated, leading to the conclusion that: "In fact, the Zoshchenko in this new book before us is, in a particular way, the 'sentimental' Zoshchenko."⁹⁶

Yet what such readings ignore is precisely the fact and importance of the development of the author-figure across the collection, positing in its place an unchanging sentimentalist. Furthermore, they ignore the way that the figure of the author is further separated from his creator by extremely skilful parody. The author-figure is always discussed in the third person just like the disjunctive authorial intrusion in 'The Earthquake', and thus he stands at some distance from the un-attributed narrating voice which remains broadly constant throughout. The effect that emerges is a parody of bad writing, where a stumbling author-figure detaches and emerges out from his own faltering attempts at writing. Yet, for all his implied literary ineptitude, the parody of the author-figure is always gentle: he is depicted as standing apart, almost excluded from a text over which he tries in vain to assert his proprietorship. The distance that pertains here is parodic. However, it is a delicate parody in which ridicule is downplayed; what predominates in its stead is a purely temporal disjuncture, a sense that the author-figure and the actual writer he purports to speak for are separated by time. Thus, Iurii Tomashevskii acutely observes that in the

⁹⁶ «Действительно, в этой новой книжке перед нами Зошенко особого рода, «сентиментальный» Зошенко.» M Ol'shevets, 'Obyvatel'skii nabat (o "Sentimental'nykh povestiakh" M. Zoshchenko)', p.148. Originally published in *Izvestiia* on 14 August 1927.

author-figure in Zoshchenko's *Sentimental Tales*: "The parody is the "writer" himself."⁹⁷

A misreading of the delicate parodic distance separating the author-figure from the actual writer could entail substantial dangers for the latter in the ideologically charged critical climate of the late 1920s. Lesley Milne has argued persuasively that, in an attempt to evade the attention of hostile critics who were inclined to simplistically conflate the author-figure with the actual writer, Zoshchenko made the parodic aspects of the author-figure more explicit in subsequent editions of the book.⁹⁸ To this might be added that Zoshchenko's substitution of the subtitle for the title in later editions could be viewed as a similar attempt to play down the implicit reference to the theme of authorship in favour of the less self-incriminating *Sentimental Tales*. The parody is made ever more obvious in a series of three additional and increasingly playful prefaces in later editions of the collection. These embellished the previously unnamed figure of the author with a character, a thumbnail biography and an artistic context; the author-figure thus became Ivan Vasil'evich Kolenkorov. Twelve years older than Zoshchenko, Kolenkorov is a petit-bourgeois provincial with a cultured and sentimental nature who finds himself classified as a right-wing fellow-traveller under the official Soviet framework of intellectual allegiance. It turns out that he is a literary novice, who has written the *Sentimental Tales* "under the guidance of the writer M M Zoshchenko, the leader of a literary circle in which our splendid author was to be found for five years or so."⁹⁹

Under the effect of this playful characterisation, Kolenkorov increasingly comes to resemble some kind of fictional narrator in the mode of Gogol's Rudi Panko

⁹⁷ «Пародия – сам «писатель».» In V Tomashevskii, "Primechaniia", 2:468.

⁹⁸ L Milne, *Zoshchenko and the Ilf-Petrov Partnership*, pp.42-43.

⁹⁹ «[...] под руководством писателя М. М. Зошенко, ведущего литературный кружок, в котором около пяти лет находился наш славный автор.» 2:8.

or Pushkin's Ivan Petrovich Belkin; he is perhaps even on the way to becoming a kind of intelligentsia equivalent of some of Zoshchenko's famous *skaz* narrators. However, this narrative fictionalisation is interrupted by a more meta-literary tone in the last preface, which is credited to Zoshchenko and dated April 1929. This preface makes it explicit to critics and readers that Kolenkorov is a "literary device"¹⁰⁰ and a "fictitious person".¹⁰¹ Furthermore, it has been necessary for Zoshchenko to imbue Kolenkorov, as a character caught on the cusp of two epochs, with "neurasthenia, ideological unsteadiness, huge contradictions and melancholia",¹⁰² while the actual author, Mikhail Zoshchenko, "the son and brother of such unhealthy people has long since moved on from all this."¹⁰³ This last phrase, while masquerading as an innocent embellishment of the preceding idea, actually undermines it and contains an important clue as to the actual nature of the author-figure. The reintroduction of Zoshchenko as "son and brother" of Kolenkorov would seem, at first glance, to take the reader back to the ambiguous relation between the author-figure and the actual writer that characterised the collection *Of What the Nightingale Sang*. Yet the important thing to grasp from this assertion is the fact that Zoshchenko "has long since moved on from all this". Thus, the final preface serves to further emphasize the temporal distance separating author-figure from writer; just as Kolenkorov is older than Zoshchenko, so the difference between the two is time.

It will be recalled from the discussion above that Petukhov's youth had a symbolic function in terms of its opposition to melancholic senescence. That Kolenkorov is older than Zoshchenko can be interpreted in the same terms which would tend to reinforce the association of Kolenkorov's authorial intrusions with the

¹⁰⁰ «Литературный прием»; 2:10.

¹⁰¹ «Воображаемое лицо»; 2:10.

¹⁰² «Неврастения, идеологическое шатание, крупные противоречия и меланхолия.» 2:10.

¹⁰³ «Сам же автор – писатель М. М. Зощенко, сын и брат таких нездоровых людей – давно перешагнул все это.» 2:10.

“neurasthenia, ideological unsteadiness, huge contradictions and melancholia” attributed to him in the prefaces. If, in addition to this, it is remembered that in the last story of the collection the author-figure (Kolenkorov) confessed to a change in outlook which rendered his previous literary efforts less appropriate to his new take on life, and that the pivotal event in this last story (‘A Merry Adventure’) was akin to a nervous collapse then it is a short step to interpret this pivotal narrative event as a comparable textual breakdown to that identified above in ‘The Earthquake’. This reading would find support in the fact that ‘A Merry Adventure’ was originally published in December 1926 and so directly bisected this period in the writer’s struggle with melancholia; it should also be recalled in this regard that early publications of *Of What the Nightingale Sang* included that authorial warning which directly referenced the 1926 breakdown.

When this parallel is explored further it yields an interesting insight: the original title of the collection was *Of What the Nightingale Sang*, importantly not *Of What the Nightingale Sings*. That the title is set in the past tense is important because it suggests a revisiting of the concerns of a past self. If it is remembered that this collection is composed of tales previously published separately and predating the collection, some dating back as far as 1923, then it becomes clearer that the author of *Of What the Nightingale Sang* is actually re-reading himself in the collection and, in a sense, reconstructing himself as result of this. In this reading the function of the author-figure is, in Andrew Solomon’s words, to “put [...] depression into the safety of the past tense.”¹⁰⁴ It may have been the safety of the past tense that enabled Zoshchenko in 1931 to give his own name to the protagonist of ‘Wisdom’, a gesture secured by relocating narrative time to before the revolution. This is also the function

¹⁰⁴ A Solomon, *The Noonday Demon: An Anatomy of Depression* (London: Vintage, 2002), p.86.

of the gentle and sophisticated parody that constructs Kolenkorov: it is construed to emphasise the temporal specificity of the melancholic self in the wake of a relapse and to render the resultant disjunctive selfhood comprehensible. Solomon evocatively describes the emergence of the self from depressive breakdown as “like a hermit crab who had outgrown one shell and given it up, crawled vulnerable across the beach, and then found another shell elsewhere.”¹⁰⁵ Kolenkorov is this abandoned shell that no longer suits the self that has recovered from nervous collapse. The “five years or so” that he spent in the literary circle led by M M Zoshchenko are perhaps the five years that separate the initial publication of the first story in the collection (‘The Nanny Goat’) in 1923 and the third of the four prefaces in which he makes this assertion in 1928. This casts a whole new light on the fact that in the same preface: “Ivan Vasil’evich expresses his gratitude to comrade Zoshchenko and wishes him future success in his arduous pedagogical activity.”¹⁰⁶ Understood from this angle, Zoshchenko’s writing seems to function as an education of the melancholic self. This is the real importance of the author-figure as it emerges from these textual breakdowns. It represents a means of contextualising the unknowability of the shattered melancholic self. The ever eloquent Andrew Solomon articulates this perennial melancholic dilemma as:

[T]hat breathless uncertainty about who I am [...]. Who is it who resists the madness or is pained by it? Who is it who is spat at? I have done years of psychotherapy and lived and loved and lost, and I have, frankly, no idea.¹⁰⁷

Zoshchenko likewise has no idea; the actual, present M M Zoshchenko who lies behind all of the tales remains as inscrutable as ever. But by delineating the old

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p.89.

¹⁰⁶ «Иван Васильевич приносит т. Зошенко свою благодарность и желает ему дальнейшей удачи в многотрудной педагогической деятельности.» 2:8.

¹⁰⁷ A Solomon, *The Noonday Demon*, p.81.

prelapsarian M M Zoshchenko in a parodic shell, Zoshchenko offers a way of understanding the slippery ineffability of the melancholic self and, as will become clearer in the course of the next few chapters, this is the first step in articulating a language of melancholia.

Chapter 5

Reading, Writing and Authorship

In the previous chapter it was suggested that Zoshchenko's *Sentimental Tales* can be understood as a sustained act of self-reflexive reading on the part of the writer: the collection enacts a careful reading of the writer's own earlier work which stretches across, and thus partly reflects, the experience of disjunctive selfhood following serious mental collapse. In *Sentimental Tales*, this act of authorial re-reading leads to the emergence of a fictionalized author-figure who comes increasingly to dominate the collection as a whole; it is a voice that is perhaps best understood as a sophisticated, parodic construction based on the actual writer himself but also distanced from him in temporal terms. This author-figure, especially once he has morphed into the character of Kolenkorov, functions as a parodic shell delineating the writer's pre-traumatic self through purely temporal parody, becoming what Igor' Sukhikh calls "the twofold author Kolenkorov-Zoshchenko" ("*dvoinoi avtor Kolenkorov-Zoshchenko*").¹ The emergence of this parodically-inflected, fictionalized authorial voice is something of a watershed moment in terms of Zoshchenko's literary evolution: it marks the beginning of a gradual movement away from those gestures of authorial effacement so typical of the fiction of the twenties, towards a tentative, parodically complex affirmation of authorial presence. As the foregoing discussion will show, this new authorial presence was to undergo significant development in Zoshchenko's subsequent works; it was to attain a far greater level of stylistic and philosophical sophistication and was ultimately to become a marked feature of all Zoshchenko's innovative longer works from the late twenties onwards. The development of this new voice and the complex interaction of reading and writing on

¹ I Sukhikh, 'Iz gogolevskoi shinel', p.221.

which it depends will be the points of focus for the current chapter. As will become apparent below, by staging its own process of adaptation, this idiosyncratic, self-reflexive mode of authorship ultimately manages to combine discursive participation in a relentlessly collectivist culture with an implicit acknowledgement of the recalcitrant nature of selfhood. Straddling the melancholic boundary between self and world, this two-fold authorial voice becomes able to adapt itself to the discursive patterns of the wider culture while simultaneously grounding them in subjective truth. In achieving this seemingly paradoxical feat, Zoshchenko's sophisticated, double-voiced didacticism becomes a sophisticated vehicle for articulating a specifically Soviet subjectivity, and thus an important step in the creation of a specifically Soviet language of melancholia.

Reading the Written Self

The most important thing to note about the new authorial presence that emerges in *Sentimental Tales* is its dependence on a pattern of re-reading. As indicated in the last chapter, all but the last tale in the original collection were published separately without an explicit view to their ultimate collection in *Sentimental Tales*; thus the act of collection and the arrangement of the tales within the cycle becomes, for Zoshchenko, an act of re-reading his own earlier work. This is perhaps made most obvious in the first edition of the collection, which then bore the title *Of What the Nightingale Sang*; at the end of the preface to this edition the author-figure, teasingly underplaying the extent of the reused material, nonetheless deliberately draws attention to the textual origins of the cycle:

In conclusion the author must say that some tales in this book are appearing in print for the second time and will already be slightly familiar to the reader. The author pleads the reader not to get angry with him. This has been done not solely for the sake of personal

gain. The author has assembled this book primarily for the integrity of the impression.²

Zoshchenko was seldom shy of recycling material: many of his comic stories appeared several times in different journals under different titles, often appearing again in collections with varying degrees of revision accompanying each publication. In this context the authorial apology above must be interpreted as, in part at least, a deliberate authorial gesture highlighting the fact of re-publication, and thus implicitly pointing to the concomitant fact of authorial re-reading. This arresting passage also, of course, invites reflection on the potential ends of such authorial re-reading. In this respect, it contains a suggestive ambiguity when it is proposed that the republication of old material has been undertaken “not only for the sake of personal gain”: the word *koryst'*, just like the English ‘personal gain’, evokes personal profit in both monetary terms and in a broader sense of self-interest. Importantly, it is left to the reader to interpret whether the sentence is to be read as a comically provocative admission of revenue maximisation, or whether there might perhaps be another aspect to the element of self interest admitted by the author. A purely comic reading might tend to favour the former, but, as so often in Zoshchenko, there remains a suggestive space for serious reflection in the chinks between ironic evasions.

In fact, Zoshchenko seems to have been a writer with a pronounced sense of literary vocation. Vera Zoshchenko (the writer’s widow) suggests an image of her husband as one who wrote primarily out of existential rather than financial need; in her account, Zoshchenko is a writer who constantly “lives in his art” (“*zhivet v svoem*

² «В заключение автор должен сказать, что некоторые повести этой книги печатаются уже вторично и слегка знакомы читателю. Автор очень просит на него не сердиться. Не только ради корысти сделано это. Автор собрал эту книгу главным образом для цельности впечатления.» (*O chem. pel solovei* [1927], p.6. The author-figure’s comic understatement notwithstanding, it was more than just “some” of the tales that were published elsewhere first; all of the tales in this collection had appeared in print before, either in journals or book collections. For publication details see Iu Tomashevskii, ‘Primechaniia’, 2:472-473.

iskusstve”) and whose “financial matters” were “unimportant” (“*Mishiny denezhnye dela nevazhny*”).³ No matter how provocatively phrased for comic effect, in this context it is difficult to conclude that financial gain is meant to be taken seriously as literary motivation; in reality, this casual comic aside functions more to inspire the reader to reflect more deeply on literary motivation and the wellsprings of creativity.⁴ In contemplating literary motivation in more existential terms, it will be recalled from the discussion of the written self in chapter three that the pattern of undisclosed rehearsal of autobiographical motifs (particularly in relation to the Rusanova-Zamyslovskaiia/Nadia V affair) was especially dense in many of the longer tales that ultimately came to make up *Of What the Nightingale Sang*, and later *Sentimental Tales*. Thus it is plausible to infer that the non-financial self-interest, that “integrity of impression” which the author-figure suggests lies behind his re-publication of old tales, may lie precisely in a re-reading of this written self, his own written self.

It is interesting to note in this regard that the author-figure which emerges in the prefaces to the collection effectively acquires responsibility for all the authorial interjections in the earlier tales, becoming a kind of composite of authorial utterances which predate him and which are re-read from the constituent tales. In this sense, the author-figure in *Sentimental Tales* is thoroughly ‘read’; he is teased out of the texture of the constituent tales themselves in an intricate process of authorial re-reading. In some ways, the ‘read’ author-figure in *Sentimental Tales* can be conceived of as the fictionalization of certain aspects of what Michel Foucault has termed the “author-

³ See Vera Zoshchenko’s recollections edited and excerpted by G V Filippov as ‘Lichnost’ M. Zoshchenko po vospominaniiam ego zheny (1916-1929)’ in N A Groznova and V P Muromskii (eds) *Materialy k tvorcheskoi biografii*, vol. 1, pp.66-67.

⁴ Further evidence of Zoshchenko’s animus against literary commodification in general can be found in *Letters to the Writer*. In answer to a letter from a sailor serving in the Black Sea fleet who proposed a literary partnership whereby his comic stories and anecdotes could be re-worked by Zoshchenko for a share of the royalties, Zoshchenko refused, insisting that “literature is not canvas and not fruit jellies and it is impossible to trade it in this way” («литература не парусина и не мармелад и нельзя так ею торговать»). *Pis'ma k pisatel'iu*, pp. 337-338.

function”: the textual persona that is “constructed” as a result “of our way of handling texts”.⁵ For Foucault, the author (as distinct from the writer) is primarily a hermeneutic and organizational convention that is part and parcel of the process of reading and organizing texts that are written in a particular way.⁶ Foucault’s sense of an author who emerges in the course of reading seems comparable to the way in which the author-figure in *Sentimental Tales* is read out of earlier tales, before being rewritten back into the collection as a whole. It is for this reason that the authorial presence in *Sentimental Tales*, and indeed in all the longer works that followed it, seems to emerge from within the texts it answers for. In this way, Igor’ Sukhikh differentiates the doubled authorial position in *Sentimental Tales* from that of comic writers who implicitly spoke from either the perspective of the past (such as Bulgakov) or from the radiant future (such as the comic duo Il’f and Petrov); he suggests that Zoshchenko’s author-figure spoke from a position of textual immanence:

The Zoshchenko-Author exists inside the represented world, on the same level as the characters. His communal apartment has never seen either a lamp under a green shade, or great constructions and polar expeditions. That is why Zoshchenko’s laughter (especially in *Sentimental Tales*) is so similar to choked-back tears.⁷

⁵ M Foucault, ‘What is an Author?’ in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, ed. D F Bouchard, trans. D F Bouchard and S Simon (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 127.

⁶ What I take from Foucault here is his suggestion of a textual personality which is, *to some degree* at least, subject to construction in the act of reading. However, my use of this important critical insight in no way implies endorsement of Foucault’s broader acceptance of some of the polemical excesses of post-structuralist theorising on authorship, in particular the manifesto-like provocations contained in Roland Barthes’ essay ‘The Death of the Author’. The *extreme* textual impersonality that Barthes suggests, and which Foucault largely accepts, is wholly incompatible with the approach adopted in this study, which relies on precisely the opposite: *a degree* of recalcitrant written personality and a consequent notion of authorship as both active and situated. See R Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. S Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), pp. 142-148.

⁷ «Зощенко-автор существует внутри изображаемого мира, на одном уровне с персонажами. Его коммунальная квартира никогда не видела ни лампы под зеленым абажуром, ни великих строек или полярных экспедиций. Потому смех Зощенко (особенно в “Сентиментальных повестях”) так похож на сдержанное рыдание.» I Sukhikh, ‘Iz gogolevskoi shineli’, p.226.

Tragic it may be, but the immanent authorial position within *Sentimental Tales* arises precisely because it is read from within the very texts that constitute it.

This fictionalized author-figure, being read into existence from within texts which substantially predate him, inevitably acquires something of a historical character; as he receives more detailed fictionalization in the form of Kolenkorov he becomes even more obviously a creature of the past. His fictional birth date (1882) places him more properly in the Symbolist generation, but this sense of belonging to the past is even more sharply emphasized by the faint Gogolian coloration he acquires. The reader is told in the preface dated May 1928 that Kolenkorov “in no time at all will, probably, come to occupy one of the prominent positions among writers of the natural school.”⁸ The ‘natural school’ is a term from nineteenth century literary history which was originally coined by the conservative critic Faddei Bulgarin in 1846 to “disparage writers who imitated Gogol’s lowly characters” before coming “to designate that branch of Russian realism which was associated with Gogol.”⁹ Sukhikh similarly notes a Gogolian aspect of *Sentimental Tales*, arguing that in these stories “Zoshchenko parted company with the past in Gogolian fashion”.¹⁰ For Sukhikh, who perhaps overstates the elegiac quality of the tales, this Gogolian leave-taking is something of a tearful parting with a bygone age;¹¹ however, it might just as convincingly be viewed as a tearful parting with a bygone self. It is important to remember that early editions of the collection formally ‘decathected’ this bygone self by maintaining a two-part structure which kept the tales from the melancholic year 1924 separate from the others; after denouncing the former as products of mental

⁸ «[...] в скором времени займет одно из видных мест среди писателей натуральной школы.» *Sentimental'nye povesti*, 2:8.

⁹ C A Moser, ‘The Natural School (natural’naya shkola)’, entry in V Terras (ed) *Handbook of Russian Literature* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 294 [pp. 293-295].

¹⁰ «Зощенко расставался с прошлым по-гоголевски»; I Sukhikh, ‘Iz gogolevskoi shineli’, p.225.

¹¹ Ibid, pp. 223-225.

illness in an authorial 'Warning', the author-figure is still unable to bring himself to exclude them, half-pleading that: "Really, you know, it's sad to throw [them] away."¹² When the author-figure in the preface to the first edition suggested that the book was collected together "primarily for the integrity of the impression" this is surely what he meant: this "impression" being the textual imprint of the writer's bygone self, its integrity is thus essential to the subjective truth of the resultant authorial portrait.

If this author-figure represents a delineation of authorial selfhood into the past tense, then one important effect of this is to open up the present self to the possibility of adaptation and change; indeed, this is implicit in the author-figure's epiphany by the end of the collection, as was noted in the last chapter. In *Sentimental Tales* however, this opening of the self to adaptation in the present remains at the level of possibility: there is no attempt to indicate what that new selfhood may be like or what new discursive attire it may adopt. This is a development that was to come only in subsequent works which built on the mode of authorial voice that emerged in *Sentimental Tales*. This subsequent development can be usefully illustrated by reference to *The Sky-Blue Book* (*Golubaia kniga*, 1934), a work which rehearses, to a greater level of complexity, a comparable interaction between re-reading, re-writing and authorship.

The Sky-Blue Book is billed at its outset as joyful; even the opening word of the preface is "gaiety", an upbeat assertion that is lent further emphasis by the fact that the opening sentence stands as a separate paragraph: 'Gaiety has never deserted us' (*Veselost' nas nikogda ne pokidala*).¹³ In addition to the unbridled joy, this opening line also introduces the author-figure in the form of the authorial "we". This is, of course, an established convention for expressing the authorial persona; it

¹² «Прямо, знаете, грустно бросить.» *O chem. pel solovei*, p. 137.

¹³ *Golubaia kniga*, 3:163.

perhaps lends the voice of the author-figure a sense of impersonality, possibly even of authority. However, it is particularly noticeable here because it is an authorial convention that is not often encountered in Zoshchenko's works.¹⁴ As the following discussion will show, in *The Sky-Blue Book* it is a convention used to distinguish the 'read' author-figure from the authorial utterances of earlier, republished stories which are cast in the first person singular. This is a crucial function and for this reason the authorial 'we' will be preserved in all the translations from *The Sky-Blue Book* rendered below, even though this risks sounding slightly contrived to the contemporary English ear.

Building on the declaratively upbeat opening of the work, the author-figure attributes an additional joyful coloration to the choice of title: at first suggesting that all the best colours have already been used in book titles, the author-figure finally opts for sky-blue:

We will name our funny and partly affecting little book with this colour of hope, which since ancient times has denoted modesty, youth and everything good and lofty; with this colour of the sky in which fly doves and aeroplanes, with the colour of the sky which unfolds above us.

And whatever might be said about this book, in it there is more joy and hope than mockery, and less irony than genuine, heartfelt love and tender affection for people.¹⁵

The playful insinuation that the author has alighted on the colour of joy and hope only once all other colours have been exhausted is significant, for it half-voices a doubt that renders the whole joyful schema suddenly very brittle. In fact, the fragility of the

¹⁴ This rigid use of the authorial 'we' stands out particularly in the context of Zoshchenko's longer works: *Sentimental Tales* predominantly cast the voice of the author-figure in the third person; *Letters to the Writer* and *Before Sunrise* both tend to adopt the first person singular for this purpose; *Youth Restored* uses all three, but without an apparent system.

¹⁵ «Этим цветом надежды, цветом, который с давних пор означает скромность, молодость и все хорошее и возвышенное, этим цветом неба, в котором летают голуби и аэропланы, цветом неба, которое расстилается над нами, мы называем нашу смешную и отчасти трогательную книжку. / И что бы об этой книге ни говорили, в ней больше радости и надежды, чем насмешки, и меньше иронии, чем настоящей, сердечной любви и нежной привязанности к людям.» 3:165.

joy in the work was obvious from the second paragraph of the preface which suggests that, just like the less than obvious joy in 'A Merry Adventure' discussed in the last chapter, the joy in *The Sky-Blue Book* will be anything but straightforward.

Gaiety has never deserted us.

For fifteen years now we have, to the best of our endeavour, been writing funny and amusing works and with our laughter have been cheering many citizens who wish to see in our lines precisely what they want to see and not something serious, instructive or something that interrupts their life with vexation.

And we, doubtless through our faint-heartedness, are endlessly happy and contented at this circumstance.

Now we have planned to write a no less joyful and amusing little book about people's most varied deeds and sentiments.¹⁶

The self-conscious joy that the book aims for thus turns out to be an attempt to reproduce the upbeat reception of the comic stories among contemporary readers; yet at the heart of this declared aspiration for cheerful content lies an intimation of a more serious side to that earlier comic writing which has implicitly eluded many of those same contemporary readers. The "serious" element here is linked to the concept of "instruction", which is a conscious gesture towards the moral mission of the satirist, but "vexation" also encompasses that melancholic shadow which, as has been argued in previous chapters, is an important, if not inseparable, aspect of Zoshchenko's comic aesthetic. The opening passage thus obliquely suggests a shadow side to the comic fiction that is read as joyful by so many; this destabilises the narrator's stated aim of replicating in *The Sky-Blue Book* the cheerful humour that readers supposedly find in the earlier comic works because the passage implicitly suggests that such

¹⁶ «Веселость нас никогда не покидала./ Вот уже пятнадцать лет мы, по мере своих сил, пишем смешные и забавные сочинения и своим смехом веселим многих граждан, желающих видеть в наших строчках именно то, что они желают видеть, а не что-нибудь серьезное, поучительное или досаждающее их жизни./ И мы, вероятно по своему малодушию, бесконечно рады и довольны этому обстоятельству. /Нынче мы замыслили написать не менее веселую и забавную книжонку о самых разнообразных поступках и чувствах людей.» 3:163.

readings are limited, if not unbalanced. The book therefore opens on a conflicted note which immediately turns the declared ambition for an upbeat tone into a form of denial, a strained joy that silently recalls its opposite. Given its ambition to replicate the upbeat way in which Zoshchenko's comic fiction was generally received, the uncomfortably exaggerated joy of the opening passage becomes an implicit suggestion that these upbeat readings are no less strained and forced. However, this is more than just a clever authorial comment on the flipside of the comic fiction; the suggestively one-sided joy of the opening will actually come to characterize much of the rest of the book, making the text as a whole wordlessly bring to mind the very opposite of the joy it extols. In fact, as will be argued below, this language of joy whose hyperbolic excess simultaneously recalls its melancholic obverse actually offers a clever device for the articulation of that very melancholic obverse: in other words it contributes to a more general language of melancholia.

However, before moving too far ahead, it is also crucial to note from the opening passage cited above how *The Sky-Blue Book* opens on an explicitly retrospective note, one inviting a gesture of re-reading that embraces the whole of Zoshchenko's literary career up to 1934. *The Sky-Blue Book* is in fact constructed around an extended act of authorial re-reading, something implicit in the stated ambition to replicate in text the wider reception of the earlier fiction. This sense of the author as reader was hinted at in the lengthy dedication of the work to Maksim Gor'kii, where Zoshchenko notes that the idea for the work came to him "while working at the moment on a book of stories and wishing to unite these stories into a single whole".¹⁷ What is not made explicit here is that the stories in question are mostly old ones: Linda Scatton has noted the extent of literary recycling in *The Sky*

¹⁷ «[...] работая нынче над книгой рассказов и желая соединить эти рассказы в одно целое»; 3:162.

Blue Book, pointing out that “thirty-nine of its forty-two stories are works which appeared previously and independently” and “included among them are some of Zoshchenko’s most well-known stories”.¹⁸ To this could be added the observation that the reach of Zoshchenko’s self-citation in the work extends back as far as 1923. Thus, on the face of it, *The Sky-Blue Book* seems to rehearse the pattern of authorial self-reading that was encountered earlier in *Sentimental Tales*; however, as shall become clear, it is done with far greater sophistication in the later work.

Yet, for all this retrospection and re-reading, it is important to note that *The Sky-Blue Book* is not simply patched together from recycled pieces alone: there are three stories that were specifically written for inclusion in the work; in addition, many of those stories previously published were subject to sometimes heavy revision. However, perhaps the greatest source of novelty in *The Sky-Blue Book* is in its appeal to history, both as a structural principle in the work and as material for the so called “historical novellas” (“*istoricheskie novelly*”) that precede the collected stories.¹⁹ In fact, the historiographical coloration of the work is evident even from the dedication, where the author-figure suggests that the work might be classified as “a short history of human relations” (“*kratkuu istoriiu chelovecheskikh otnoshenii*”).²⁰ The function of the appeal to history is, in the first instance, that of organizing and contextualizing the stories: the stories are collected into five sections with each section being preceded by a series of short historical scenes which are connected with the theme of that section; moreover, it is claimed that the five thematic divisions are themselves derived from reading history:

And so, having ourselves leafed through the pages of history with
the hand of an ignoramus and dilettante, we noticed, without

¹⁸ L H Scatton, *Evolution of a Writer*, p.188.

¹⁹ 3:165.

²⁰ 3:162.

expecting it ourselves, that the majority of the most unlikely events occurred due to an extremely small number of reasons. We noticed that a special role in history was played by money, love, deviousness, failure and some or other wonderful events [...].²¹

What is at once striking about this passage is precisely what it does not mention: dialectical materialism, relations to the means of production, class conflict and all the other politico-economic paraphernalia of the Marxian theory of history. It is important to understand the baldness (and the boldness) of this omission in the context of the Soviet Union of the mid-thirties: history was the *sanctum sanctorum* of Marxism-Leninism and was consequently one of the most politicized fields of intellectual endeavour; it was precisely its absolute understanding of the immutable (Marxian) laws of history that provided the philosophical justification for the dictatorial rule of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Needless to say, Marxist theories of history attribute absolutely no causal potential or explanatory power to subjective factors like “love”, “deviousness” or the play of fortune; from the perspective of Marxist historiography in particular, the historical musings in *The Sky-Blue Book* appear naïve and unorthodox in the extreme. Of course, what makes such historiographical unorthodoxy acceptable in the politically-charged cultural climate of the Stalinist thirties is the deliberately naïve and self-deprecating authorial pose that is adopted: this is quite clearly a parody of history.

Indeed, this parodic vein characterizes all the “historical novellas” which are mostly constituted by imagined re-workings of genuine historical episodes from the history of various countries and periods. Thus, looking at the section entitled ‘Money’ (‘*Den'gi*’) the reader encounters an imagined argument between the Roman Emperor Julian and his wife over money which recalls any number of domestic quarrels to be

²¹ «И вот, перелистав страницы истории своей рукой невежды и дилетанта, мы подметили неожиданно для себя, что большинство самых невероятных событий случилось по весьма немногочисленным причинам. Мы подметили, что особую роль в истории играли деньги, любовь, коварство, неудачи и кое-какие удивительные события [...]» 3:163-164.

found elsewhere in Zoshchenko's non-historical, comic fiction. The emperor having overbid for the throne of Rome has to face his irate wife: "'You're a complete fool!' the emperor's wife probably told him. 'You blurt out thirteen million! They'd have given it us for nine...'"²² To this the chastened emperor can only reply: "Well how was I supposed to know. You'd have nagged me to death if someone stumped up more than me."²³ In a similar vein, the narrator describes a meeting among Catholic priests who convene to discuss a shortfall in ecclesiastical finances where the imagined dialogue seems to belong more to the meeting of a house committee in a Soviet communal apartment than to a conclave of cardinals. There is even "a holy speaker" ("*sviatoi dokladchik*") whose bleak financial prognostications lead the assembled clerics to decide on the sale of indulgences.²⁴ Moving to Russian history, the author relates, in comically earthy dialogue, the theft by the incorrigibly corrupt regent Prince Men'shikov of a monetary gift to the young Tsar Peter II from a group of Petersburg merchants. In Zoshchenko's re-working of the scene, the young Tsar, on finding out about Men'shikov's transgression, "literally hollered at him": "'I'll show you that I'm the emperor!' cried the furious stripling."²⁵ The young Tsar's spirited confrontation with Menshikov is rendered in a comic colloquial register which is as alien to the court etiquette of the time as it is to the usual tone and focus of serious historiography:

'Really,' said the boy once he met Menshikov, 'why did you make off with my money? You're so sly!'
 'W-What money your highness? What do you ...? Have mercy... I never clapped eyes on...'

²² «Ты просто дурак! – вероятно, сказала супруга императору. – Брякнуть тринадцать миллионов! Они бы нам и за девять уступили...» 3:171.

²³ «Ну уж, матушка, почему я знал. Ты бы меня со свету сжила, ежели бы кто другой перебил.» 3:171.

²⁴ 3:172-173.

²⁵ «[Б]уквально наорал на него.

- Я тебе покажу, что я император! – вскричал разгневанный отрок.» 3:174.

‘What money?! Most likely he took it himself and now he says, “What money?”... It was brought for me, not for you.’
 ‘Oh, that money ... that the merchants brought your highness?’
 ‘Yes, that money... I’m the emperor, not you ... the merchants maybe brought it for me ...’
 ‘Oh yes, yes ... I remember now, your highness ... but I, you know, gave orders that, umm ... it was, umm ... to be brought to me. Why not, I was thinking, let it lie with me for a bit, just while your highness was growing-up.’
 ‘Give me back my money,’ bawled the boy. ‘I’ll tell mama, I’ll show you that I’m the emperor!’²⁶

This style, peppered with comically jarring anachronisms and colloquialisms, is used for all the remaining “historical novellas”, be it the flirtation between the aged Catherine II and her young lover and political favourite or an imagined conversation (after an episode in Suetonius) between Nero and the builder constructing the collapsing ceiling that was intended to kill the emperor’s mother.²⁷

The most obvious literary precedent for this kind of parody history in general, and the comically re-imagined historical scene in particular, is the well known, early twentieth-century *Universal History as Reworked by ‘Satirikon’* (*Vseobshchaia istoriia, obrabotannaia ‘Satirikonom’*, 1910).²⁸ As Lesley Milne has shown, the parody in this earlier work played on the history taught in the Imperial school system as enshrined in particular textbooks; this parodic reference was something that the educated, intelligentsia readership of *Satirikon* could be relied upon to understand and

²⁶ « - Да-а, сказал мальчишка, встретив Меньшикова. - Ты что же это мои деньги заграбастал? Хитрый какой!

- Ка-акие деньги, ваше величество? Что вы?.. Помилуйте... в глаза-с не видал...

- Да-а... какие! Сам небось взял, а теперь говорит – «какие»... Это мне принесли, а не тебе.

- Ах, эти деньги... Что купцы принесли, ваше величество?

- Да-а... Я император, а не ты... Купцы, может, мне принесли...

- Ах, да, да... вспоминаю, ваше величество... А я их, знаете ли... велел, тово... к себе, тово... отнести. Пушай, думаю, у меня полежат, покуда ваше величество не подрастет.

- Отдай мои деньги, - заревел мальчишка. - Я маме скажу. Я тебе покажу, что я император!» 3:174-175.

²⁷ 3:236 and 3:286-287 respectively.

²⁸ The textual similarities between the parody history of the *satirikontsy* and *The Sky-Blue Book* have been pointed out by Lesley Milne: see L Milne, ‘*Universal History as Reworked by ‘Satirikon’ and 1066 and All That as Parody History Textbooks: A Suggestion of a Literary Genre*’, *The Modern Language Review*, 100:3 (July 2005), p. 736 (Note 37).

so to provide the requisite cultural traction for the comic writing.²⁹ This parodic treatment of institutionalized history arises, Milne suggests, “in conditions when the confident textbook narrative of a country is coming under question.”³⁰ While obviously not a product of a conscious sense of living through historical end-times in the way that *Universal History* is, and while not being able to exploit the same particular commonality of educational reference as its illustrious pre-revolutionary predecessor, the historical novellas in *The Sky-Blue Book* nonetheless achieve an effect which bears at least passing comparison to the work of the *satirikontsy*. Its parodied history is surely the dry and impersonal Marxist orthodoxy whose concentration on irresistible economic forces and nameless international economic elites depersonalizes the historical process; Zoshchenko’s re-worked scenes evoke this yawning omission by re-inscribing the human element into history. This point is made time and again by comically evoking the authoritative ‘voice of history’ in the narration of the historical novellas: the reader is told repeatedly how something occurred “according to history” (“*soglasno istorii*”), or that “history relates” (“*istoriia rasskazyvaet*”), or even that “impartial history relates” (“*besstrastnaia istoriia rasskazyvaet*”).³¹

This sense of projecting the personal back into history has some precedent in Zoshchenko’s work. In *Mishel’ Siniagin* (1930), the author-figure of that tale comically imagines life in the sixteenth-century as an endless round of duelling, defenestration and violent revenge which people then “didn’t notice and lived on, just spitting and getting on with things” (“*ne zamechali i zhili poplevyvaia*”).³² The point of this comic projection is to indicate that man adapts to the demands of his epoch.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 730.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 737.

³¹ For example see 3:171, 173 and 175.

³² *Mishel’ Siniagin*, 2:181.

which is an important point in a novella about a poet living at odds with his historical era. Yet in *The Sky-Blue Book* the projection of the personal onto the vast expanses of history is far more comprehensive and the point it makes is correspondingly more subtle and complex. Its satirical thrust accords closely with a more general theme of the book which emphasizes the personal over the impersonal and the particular over the aggregate. Linda Scatton notes how, especially towards the end of *The Sky-Blue Book*, Zoshchenko “voices caution and concern over the tendency to disregard the individual, the human element, in grandiose plans as a whole.”³³ Tsesar’ Vol’pe, in a sensitive contemporary reading of the work, similarly stresses the way in which the parodic economy of the work acts as a spur to independent thought on the part of the reader; thus the reader is often told: “figure it out yourselves” (“*razbiraite’s sami*”) and “think for yourselves” (“*obdumyvajte sami*”).³⁴ However, in parallel with, and connected to, this satirical argument for a more human understanding of history, there is also a very real sense in which the author-figure in the *Sky-Blue Book* is quietly defining himself with his unusual reading of history.

There is a marked consistency of style and content between the stories and the historical novellas which, allied with the unusual take on historiography, leads one to the suspicion that the author-figure is really reading himself in a vast historical canvas more than he is earnestly pursuing the muse of history. It is important to note in this respect that Zoshchenko placed enormous stress on the stylistic unity of the historical sections and the stories; Zoshchenko was emphatic in his response to a hostile critic who, taking offence at the “formalism” (“*formalism*”) he detected in the language of the historical sections, suggested that a different language would have been better:

³³ L Scatton, *Evolution of a Writer*, p. 206.

³⁴ Ts Vol’pe, *Iskusstvo nepokhozhesti*, pp. 270-273. For Zoshchenko citations see 3:294 and 346 respectively.

If the historical novellas mixed into *The Sky-Blue Book* had been written in a completely different language to the Soviet novellas lying nearby, then it would have resulted in absurdity because the historical section would have looked solemn which did not fit with my aims. Secondly, I needed to break down the habitual, traditional approach of the reader to such a theme.³⁵

Interestingly, the satirical need to modify the general understanding of history is accorded a different, even secondary, order in the writer's justification for preserving the stylistic integrity of the work. The primary imperative for unity of narrative and linguistic approach across the two aspects of the book is to prevent it descending into the absurd, which, crucially, "does not fit with" Zoshchenko's "aims", but what these aims are is left glaringly unsaid. However, what this sentence does invite is a focus on the style and language as the primary means by which the elements of this disjunctive work are bound together: the stylistic coherence unites them in the voice of the author-figure, who, as much as anything else, quietly defines himself across both the historical and the fictional aspects of *The Sky-Blue Book*.

This sense of an authorial position being *read* out of the unknowably vast canvas of history finds an interesting corollary in the author-figure's revisiting of his own earlier stories in the re-working of the previously published material. What is often most striking about these re-workings is just how much the alterations stand out against the background of the original stories; this is, of course, much more the case in those stories that were extremely popular in their earlier versions. A case in point is the story entitled 'A Trivial Incident from Private Life' ('Melkii sluchai iz lichnoi zhini') in *The Sky-Blue Book* which is a re-working of the famous comic tale 'The Galosh' ('Galosha', 1927). One of the most obvious changes to the revised version is

³⁵ «Если бы исторические новеллы, помещенные в 'Голубой книге', были написаны совсем иным языком, чем рядом лежащие советские новеллы, то получились бы абсурд, потому что историческая часть выглядела бы торжественно, что не входило в мои задачи. Во вторых, мне нужно было разбить привычный и традиционный подход читателя к такой теме.» 'Literatura dolzhna byt' narodnoi' in M M Zoshchenko, 1935-1937: *Rasskazy, povesti, fel'etony, teatr, kritika* (Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1937), pp. 390-391 [pp. 387-397].

a general softening of the satire on bureaucracy. One of the most memorable taglines from the original was the hero's thrice repeated wonder at the functioning of the bureaucratic apparatus. When his lost galosh is first found in the lost property office of the tram line he lost it on the hero declares: "'There,' I thought, 'is a machine that works splendidly.'"³⁶ However, this lyrical wonder contracts as the bureaucratic hassles accumulate; first to go from the line is the "splendidly";³⁷ then it finally reduces further in the last line of the story to a minimal "'There,' I thought, 'is a machine!'"³⁸ In the *Sky-Blue Book* version this whole comic pattern is deliberately watered down by removing the repetition of the evocative "*apparat*" at the end of the progressively shortened sentence. In addition, the sequential shortening of this tagline noted above is also interrupted in the revised version: the first part of the tagline is as per the original;³⁹ it then becomes "'There,' I thought, 'are people that work!'"⁴⁰ finally, it becomes "'There,' I thought, 'is an office that works'".⁴¹ In a similar vein, the darkly comic bureaucratic abysses separating the lost property office and the house management committee in which the hero of the original tale is abandoned to his fate are narrowed in the version in *The Sky-Blue Book*. In the revised version the faceless clerks are incongruously sympathetic and even help the hero fill in the gaps in the paper trail required to get his lost galosh back. Thus, the satirical thrust diminishes and is subtly redirected from the *apparat* to the people who work in it.

Also interesting is the way that the first person *skaz* narration of the original blends imperfectly with the authorial 'we' that frames the story in its setting in *The Sky-Blue Book*. This author-figure, who provides a concluding paragraph in the

³⁶ «Вот, - думаю, - славно аппарат работает.» 'Galosha' in M M Zoshchenko, *Sobranie sochinenii* (Leningrad: Priboi/Khudozhestvannaia literatura, 1929-31), 6 volumes, vol. 2, p. 135.

³⁷ «Вот, - думаю, - аппарат работает!» Ibid, p.136.

³⁸ «Вот, - думаю, - аппарат!» Ibid, p.137.

³⁹ 3:372.

⁴⁰ «Вот, - думаю, - люди работают!» 3:373.

⁴¹ «Вот, - думаю, - канцелярия работает!» 3:373.

revised version, asserts his authorship of the story and simultaneously suggests that the story was based on his personal experience.⁴² He also offers some interpretative advice to readers:

But, on the whole, the issue here is not the tram, but the twisted psychology itself. And in as far as a struggle is going on against this psychology and in general the bureaucracy is getting better, then what is even the issue here? Of course, this struggle is hardly easy. Moreover, such psychology is stupidity more than anything else, and stupidity is not a headache that passes with the taking of a powder.⁴³

This passage apparently dismisses the anti-bureaucracy moral that was implicit in the earlier version of the story; yet, there remains a sense of vagueness around the notion of “psychology”: is this the psychology of mindless bureaucracy or is this psychology in a more general sense, a psychology that might embrace the “twisted” understanding of the hero himself? Read in this way, the stoical ending of this passage constitutes a melancholy resignation before unregenerate human weakness which is as all-embracing as anything else Zoshchenko ever wrote. In fact, the authorial assertion here never really manages to fully appropriate the story; this fact is underscored by the disjuncture between the authorial “we” and the “I” which survives from the old *skaz* narrator. As both Lesley Milne and Iurii Shcheglov have noted, the two perspectives created by this disjuncture never perfectly coincide.⁴⁴ The authorial interventions thus remain something of an obvious excrescence on what was one of Zoshchenko’s most famous comic stories; a good proportion of his avid readership

⁴² 3:373.

⁴³ «А в общем, тут дело даже не в трамвае, а в самой закрученной психологии. А поскольку с этой психологией идет борьба и вообще канцелярия выравнивается, то об чем же может быть и речь. Конечно, это борьба нелегкая. Тем более подобная психология есть скорее всего глупость. А глупость – не головная боль, которая от порошка проходит.» 3:373.

⁴⁴ See Iu Shcheglov, ‘Entsiklopediia nekul’turnosti’, p. 83 and L Milne, *Zoshchenko and the Ilf-Petrov Partnership*, p. 76.

may well have known this story by heart and so could probably have been relied upon to spot this immediately.

A similarly clumsy authorial presence is characteristic of the piece called in *The Sky-Blue Book* 'Story About a Letter and About an Illiterate Woman' ('Rasskaz o pis'me i o negramotnoi zhenshchine'). This is a re-working of a story originally entitled 'Liquidation' ('Likvidatsiia', 1924), which was also published at other points in the twenties under the titles 'Pelegeia' and 'The Letter' ('Pis'mo'). The basic plot remains unchanged throughout and concerns Pelegeia, the illiterate wife of a Soviet official. The husband is embarrassed by his wife's inability to read and write and tries unsuccessfully to persuade his spouse to become literate. This all changes when his wife discovers a perfumed letter in his jacket pocket and in a jealous rage teaches herself to read using a primer her husband had provided earlier. However, when she manages to read the letter, it turns out to be a perfectly innocent communication from a female colleague of her husband encouraging him to help his wife overcome her illiteracy and enclosing a primer for this purpose, the very primer which the illiterate spouse had used in order to be able to read the letter. While the plot remains unchanged for its re-working in *The Sky-Blue Book*, there are interesting additions to earlier versions of the story. The character of the husband in earlier versions was fairly undeveloped: the reader was told only that:

Pelageia's husband was a responsible Soviet employee. And although he was a simple man, from the countryside, after five years living in the city he'd picked up everything. Not only could he sign his name, but the devil knows if there was anything he didn't know.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ «[М]уж у Пелагеи был ответственный советский работник. И хотя он был человек простой, из деревни, но за пять лет житья в городе поднатерел во всем. И не только фамилию подписывать, а чорт знает, чего только не знал.» 'Pelageia' in M M Zoshchenko, *Sobranie sochinenii* (6 volumes, Leningrad: Priboi/Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1929-31), vol. 1, p. 165.

In the revised story the reader is given a lot more information. It turns out that he lives in Leningrad and that “he was not yet old, was strong, mature and on the whole, you know, energetic, dedicated to the cause of socialism, etc.”⁴⁶ This sense of the husband as a positive socialist hero is developed even further in the revised version of the passage about his abilities cited above:

And although he was a simple man, from the countryside, who’d not once received any kind of higher education, after years of living in the city he’d picked up everything, knew many things and could present speeches in any auditorium. And he could even fully take part in arguments with scientists of different fields – from physiologists to electricians inclusive.⁴⁷

The arguments that the husband presents to Pelageia in order to persuade her to learn to read and write also acquire a greater, and more political, prolixity in *The Sky-Blue Book*. In earlier versions of the story the husband only suggests that Pelageia’s refusal to learn how to sign her name is “awkward” (“*nelovko*”),⁴⁸ but in the version in *The Sky-Blue Book* this argument becomes more of a political homily and acquires a much more accusatory edge:

‘Our country,’ he said, ‘is gradually leaving centuries of darkness and unculturedness. All around we’re liquidating drabness and illiteracy. And here all of a sudden the wife of the director of a bread factory can’t read, or write, or understand anything written! And because of this I endure impossible sufferings.’⁴⁹

Thus, in the version of the story included in *The Sky-Blue Book* the figure of the literate husband is emphasized far more than in earlier versions; he becomes a

⁴⁶ «Он был нестарый человек, крепкий, развитой и вообще, знаете ли, энергичный, преданный делу социализма и так далее.» 3:247.

⁴⁷ «И хотя он был человек простой, из деревни, и никакого такого в свое время высшего образования не получил, но за годы пребывания в городе он поднатерел во всем и много чего знал и мог в любой аудитории речи произносить. И даже вполне мог вступать в споры с учеными разных специальностей – от физиологов до электриков включительно.» 3:247.

⁴⁸ ‘Pelageia’, p. 165.

⁴⁹ «Наша страна, говорит, постепенно выходит из вековой темноты и некультурности. Мы кругом ликвидируем серость и неграмотность. А тут вдруг супруга директора хлебозавода не может ни читать, ни писать, ни понимать чего написано! И я от этого терплю невозможные страдания.» 3:248.

progressive socialist hero whose positivity, optimism and youthful outlook form a suggestive counterpoint, completely absent in earlier versions of the story, to the age, insecurity and hermetic ignorance of his illiterate wife. By building up the socialist credentials of the husband, the story as revised for *The Sky-Blue Book* thus strengthens the voice of social adaptation and Soviet modernisation acting upon Pelageia and extends it beyond the official literacy campaign. In earlier versions of the story, this voice of adaptation and modernisation was much more muted; it was more of a voice in the wilderness which was only able to breach the redoubt of ignorant selfhood by the most circuitous means: appealing to purely personal reasons. Importantly, for all the strengthening of this 'social' voice in the version in *The Sky-Blue Book*, Pelageia's acquisition of literacy remains dependent on her very personal motivation and not on either the official campaign or the sermonising of her politically engaged spouse.

In fact, the most striking revision to the version of the story included in *The Sky-Blue Book* is in the ending. Earlier versions finished on an image of the inexplicable misery of the heroine when she finally understands the letter and is acquainted with its innocent contents: "Pelageia went over the letter twice and, having mournfully pursed her lips and feeling some kind of secret hurt, she began to cry."⁵⁰ The reader is left to ponder the strange hurt the heroine feels in place of the relief that might be otherwise expected of her: perhaps it is shame or embarrassment that torments her; perhaps a mute mourning for the simple certainties of the unlettered self. Whatever the reason, this natural end point leaves the hurt definitively private, artfully unexplained. However, the version from 1934 modifies the phrasing slightly

⁵⁰ «Пелагея дважды перечла это письмо и, сжав губы и чувствуя какую-то тайную обиду, заплакала.» 'Pelageia', p. 168.

and adds several extra lines of aesthetically extraneous conclusion that disrupts the natural end point of the story:

Pelageia read through the letter twice and, feeling some kind of new hurt, began to cry.

But then, having thought of Ivan Nikolaevich [her husband] and about the fact that everything was alright with her marriage, she calmed down and hid the primer and the ill-starred letter in a chest of drawers.

So, in no time at all, driven on by love and jealousy, our Pelageia has learnt to read and write and become literate.

And this was a striking incident from the history of the liquidation of illiteracy in our Soviet Union.⁵¹

Even if one has not encountered this story before – and affecting as it is, it is not one of Zoshchenko's most famous pieces – one still cannot help but notice a disjuncture between the natural endpoint of the old story after “began to cry” and the appended conclusion beginning with “but then”. The old ending of the revised story is preserved, only for it to be packed away by the obviously appended conclusion; a new ending which, it must be said, contributes nothing at all to elucidating the strange “new hurt” which afflicts the newly literate Pelageia.

The obviousness these re-workings is a feature of much of the recycled material in *The Sky-Blue Book*. It creates an uncomfortable sense of disjuncture which renders both the author-figure and the joy he professes seem very unstable indeed. All this raises very pressing questions about interpretation: exactly what is the critic to make of such apparently clumsy re-working? One approach is to regard this aspect of the book as evidence of artistic failure, seeing in the tenuous coherence and

⁵¹ «Пелагея два раза прочитала это письмо и, чувствуя какую-то новую обиду, заплакала. / Но потом, подумав об Иване Николаевиче и о том, что в ее супружеской жизни все в порядке, успокоилась и спрятала в комод букварь и злополучное письмо. / Так в короткое время, подгоняемая любовью и ревностью, наша Пелагея научилась читать и писать и стала грамотной. / И это был поразительный случай из истории ликвидации неграмотности у нас в Союзе.» 3:250.

unconvincing joy the marks, to a greater or lesser extent, of plain bad writing. This is the view of Linda Scatton: she regards the authorial bridging passages between stories as “not always successful and, indeed, sometimes even quite forced”; furthermore, she argues that they “are obtrusive and seem to detract from, rather than strengthen, the unity by calling attention to it in such a blatant fashion.”⁵² More generally, she suggests that the optimistic intentions of the work also fail to convince “because Mikhail Zoshchenko’s talents did not lie in the area of unambiguously positive portrayal of human beings.”⁵³ To this might be added the fact that, as suggested above about both the re-worked ‘Galosh’ and ‘Pelageia’, many of the re-workings are artistically less satisfying than their originals. However, it could be argued that all these observations are beside the point: the re-workings of old stories in *The Sky-Blue Book* do not erase the originals; instead they invoke them, relate to them, and interact with them. In a very real sense, the meaning of the revised versions is distorted without reference to the earlier ones. This is a point easily missed today when relying on collected works that frequently do not reproduce both variants of stories; however, it would have been much clearer to a contemporary readership who had encountered at least some of the originals first time round. In fact, the revised versions, no matter how unconvincing or aesthetically disappointing, remain locked in an inescapable web of intertextual dependency with the originals; these earlier versions function in this context as a kind of unshakeable textual memory.

It is out of this complex field of self-referential, intertextual play that the author-figure emerges; in the pattern of the authorial presence in *Sentimental Tales*, here he is very much a product of a conscious re-reading of past textual selves. However, the key difference here is that the author-figure is no longer a creation in

⁵² L. Scatton, *Evolution of a Writer*, p. 189.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

the past tense, as in *Sentimental Tales*; rather, following on from the note of change that marked the closing of that collection, he becomes a figure associated with the present, even with the future, with the possibility of re-writing and adaptation in the broadest sense. At the close of the short fifth section on 'Wonderful Events' ('Udivitel'nye sobytiia'), a section that was supposed "to sound like Beethoven's Eroica symphony" ("zazvuchat' kak Geroicheskaia symfoniia Betkhovena"), this orientation to the future is made explicit.⁵⁴

And we see how through all impossible misfortunes, through dark,
cold and fog, it is always the case that bright thought, good spirits,
hope and fortitude force their way through.

We see how, alongside wretched and base deeds there are wonderful
ones, worthy of the highest appellation and approval.

We see, finally, how our life changes and how from one thing it is
made into another – a thing of the kind that will be necessary and
useful for the population.⁵⁵

The author-figure acknowledges that the stories and historical investigations of the preceding sections present much that is depressing, but he focuses on the wonderful, the potential plasticity of mankind and a complete faith in an open future to underwrite the joy he propagates. He makes this clearer still by citing and arguing with the opening stanza of Blok's poem 'Voice from the Chorus' ('Golos iz khora', 1910-1914):

And we are now pleased at the opportunity to argue with the poet,
who did not see this fifth part of life [i.e. wonderful events] and who
in his time spoke these words:

How often we cry, you and I

⁵⁴ 3:164.

⁵⁵ «А мы видим, что сквозь все невозможные невзгоды, сквозь мрак, холод и туман всегда пробиваются светлая мысль, бодрость, надежда и мужество. / Мы видим, как наряду с жалкими и низкими поступками происходят удивительные поступки, достойные наивысшего названия и одобрения. / Мы, наконец, видим, как меняется наша жизнь и как из одной она делается другой – такой, как это будет нужно и полезно для населения.» 3:422.

Over this sorry life of ours!
 Oh, if only you knew, my friends,
 The cold and dark of coming
 days.⁵⁶

Blok's poem is one of his bleakest and, as Avril Pyman has shown, it is very much a product of his own debilitating melancholia; indeed the poet later wondered whether "it would have been better for those words to have remained unsaid".⁵⁷ The poem rehearses unspecified apocalyptic forebodings which find form in the anticipation of a failed spring and a sun that does not rise: "And spring, my children, you will await – | Spring will fail you. | You will call the sun into the sky – | The sun won't rise."⁵⁸ In other words it is a poem that radically forecloses the possibility of a future; it is precisely in this that lies its melancholy and precisely this that the author-figure of *The Sky-Blue Book* finds so objectionable. He does not deny the "cold and the dark", indeed he even repeats these very words with the addition of a symbolist-sounding "fog" in the passage immediately preceding his citation of Blok. However, he refuses to allow it to close off the future as completely as Blok does.

The "cold and dark" that the author-figure tries to look beyond is perhaps most obviously evident in the recalcitrant textual traces of the earlier versions of the stories, which still lurk threateningly beneath the author-figure's joyful palimpsest. Thus, Zoshchenko's failure to eradicate the traces of the earlier versions is not tantamount to literary failure at all; crucially, the persistent echo of previous versions makes the re-writing seem to be more of an impassioned desire than a completely accomplished

⁵⁶ «И мы теперь рады случаю поспорить с поэтом, который в свое время так сказал, не видя пятой части жизни:

Как часто плачем – вы и я | Над жалкой жизнью своей! | О, если б знали вы, друзья, | Холод и мрак грядущих дней.» 3:422.

⁵⁷ See A Pyman, *The Life of Alexander Blok: Volume II: The Release of Harmony 1908-1921* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 93. See also A Pyman, *The Life of Alexander Blok: Volume I: The Distant Thunder 1880-1908* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 47. The citation is from the recollections of V Rozhdestvenskii of an informal reading at the Poets' Union late in Blok's life; they are quoted in the second volume of Pyman's biography (p. 365).

⁵⁸ «Весны, дитя, ты будешь ждать – | Весна обманет. | Ты будешь солнце на небо звать – | Солнце не встанет.» A Blok, 'Golos iz khora' in *Stikhotvoreniia* (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1955), p. 377.

fact, more joyful hope than paradise gained. The note of discordance in the author-figure's major-key symphony is actually a profound gesture of truthfulness: Zoshchenko does not "fail" in some attempt to give an "unambiguously positive portrayal"; the point is rather that the very unalloyed joy is fundamentally unconvincing as an artistic aim, both philosophically and in terms of the reflection of reality. Importantly, the disjuncture created by this interrupted major-key corresponds to the disjuncture noted earlier between the authorial "I" of the re-read stories and the authorial "we" that binds the book together under the banner of optimism. It is perhaps only at this point that we realize an important effect of the adoption of this split authorial voice: the optimistic, future-oriented voice is plural, collective; the voice of threatening pessimism is singular. Whereas Blok's melancholic sentiment was given free rein in 'Voice from the chorus', Zoshchenko's melancholia is channelled into the personal and the past; optimism and hope find possibility only in the collective, in the social, in the future.

It is important to note, however, that, in addition to its striving for greater artistic truthfulness in general, this interrupted joy voices a more particularly melancholic truth as well. The two-dimensional, univocal joy that the author-figure artfully fails to achieve in *The Sky-Blue Book* would have been an extreme example of "pallid" melancholic discourse had it actually been accomplished; in its distance from the actuality of melancholic selfhood it would have seemed foreign, unconvincing and ultimately meaningless in terms of subjective melancholic truthfulness. In fact, what the contradictory coherence of the split author-figure in *The Sky-Blue Book* achieves is to craft a sincere paean to worldly joy *in the context of* the alienated melancholic self. The joy is earnestly desired and is even propagandised in terms of contemporary social adaptation, but, through a parody of bad writing and the density of intertextual

memory it is never allowed to lose sight of the melancholic alienation against which it implicitly defines itself; in an important sense the joyful thrust of the work carries the isolated melancholic self with it into the realm of public discourse. This is already a substantial development along the path of writing the truth of the melancholic self: when one thinks back to the wordless textual lacunae and the melancholic ambivalence of the imperfectly effaced authorial self that characterised the melancholic aesthetic of the previous decade, then the assertion of unspeakable melancholic truth has reached a new level of directness and sophistication in *The Sky-Blue Book*.

This language of melancholic truth is achieved through an implicit process of adaptation which the book enacts: an adaptation from a subjective melancholy associated with the past to a collective joy associated with the future; an adaptation taking place at the level of authorial re-reading and re-writing. What is important in this process of adaptation, however, is the process itself, not the completed outcome: it remains, so to speak, caught in suspended motion with both poles of the dialectic more or less intact; the renounced melancholic self is no more vanquished than the yearned for collective joy is completely attained. This focus on process rather than outcome resonates interestingly with some of Zoshchenko's critical reflections on the nature of Socialist Realism which date from shortly after the publication of *The Sky-Blue Book*:

In my opinion, Socialist Realism is that method of realistic writing in which a special role is played by the theme of the work; that is, it is not only a true realistic depiction of reality, but it is, still furthermore, the will of the author, the purposefulness of the author, which, by means of his work, draws the reader into the circle of socialist ideas. That is, the theme of Socialist Realism is not stasis, but dynamism. This is, if it is possible to say so, work on the

consciousness of the reader, the drawing in of the writer into the given theme and idea.⁵⁹

What is clear here is the idea of capturing the 'wheel in spin'; the emphasis falls as much on movement and development as it does on static outcome. Also interesting is the mutual implication of reading and writing in this process; importantly, there is nothing here to indicate that "the reader" whose "consciousness" is worked on and "the writer" who is drawn into "the given theme and idea" cannot be aspects of the same person.

In fact this is exactly the case in *The Sky-Blue Book*; the author-figure, as agent in his own adaptation, is both a reader and writer. What is more, when we recall the density of written self in the stories from the twenties that was analyzed by Zholkovsky and discussed in chapter three, then this re-reading and re-writing of old stories acquires a much more flesh and blood character; also still undisclosed as such, it becomes a very real re-reading and re-writing of M M Zoshchenko, albeit on a fictional plane. In this lies the work's most profound melancholic insight. Importantly, it matters little whether the authorial adaptation can be achieved in a definitive sense; indeed the text of *The Sky-Blue Book* offers every reason to doubt the possibility of its perfect accomplishment. What it reveals is that the human condition paradoxically demands a combination of the *desire* for and *belief* in infinite plasticity and perfect social integration, and the simultaneous *realization* of the reality of an inescapable, unregenerate selfhood. This melancholic dilemma is captured perfectly in the complex play of re-read and re-written authorship in *The Sky-Blue Book*; crucially, the

⁵⁹ «По-моему, социалистический реализм есть такой метод реалистического письма, при котором особую роль играет тема произведения, то есть это есть не только правдивое реалистическое изображение действительности, а это есть, кроме того, еще воля автора, целеустремленность автора, который своим произведением вовлекает читателя в круг социалистических идей. То есть тема социалистического реализма – это не статика, а динамика. Это, если так можно сказать, работа над сознанием читателя, вовлечение писателя в данную тему и идею.» М М Zoshchenko, 'Osnovnye voprosy nashei professii', 1935-1937: *Rasskazy, povesti, fel'etony, teatr, kritika* (Leningrad: Khodozhestvennaia literatura, 1937), p. 377 [pp. 374-380].

fact that this aspect of the melancholic condition can find textual reflection in this way raises the possibility of writing the unwritable truth of melancholia, of articulating a language of melancholia.

Reading the Relational Self

If the figure of the author in *Sentimental Tales* and *The Sky-Blue Book* is grounded in an act of self-reflexive reading, then a comparably 'read' authorial position can also be seen to emerge in those works where the author defines himself in relation to the texts of others. This articulation of selfhood in textual conversation with others forms another important aspect of Zoshchenko's emerging language of melancholia. This kind of reading of the self in the text of the other is a prominent, if under acknowledged feature of two important works: *Letters to the Writer* (1929) and the long tale 'Story of a Reforging' ('Istoriia odnoi perekovki', 1934). The former, an unusual work with few generic parallels in world literature of any period, has continually intrigued critics from the moment of its appearance. In line with its title, the work is structured around a collection of letters selected from the mass of correspondence that Zoshchenko received from his large readership. In the finished collection, the letters are reproduced in such a way as to suggest that, beyond the erasure of names and identifying details, they have been subject to minimal editorial intervention: all grammatical and orthographical solecisms remain; idiosyncrasies of speech, punctuation and register have likewise been preserved; and there is no obvious attempt to modify the attitudes or conclusions broached in the letters. In fact, as Gregory Carleton has confirmed, in many cases the authenticity of the printed letters can be verified against originals that are preserved in the Zoshchenko archive.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ G Carleton, *The Politics of Reception*, p.121.

The work as a whole is introduced by a first-person authorial preface and each letter is individually introduced and commented on in the same authorial voice. The commentary usually gives some indication of the reply, which in turn often forms the pretext for a relatively frank articulation of the author's viewpoint on a variety of matters, mostly, but not exclusively, of a literary nature. In view of the novelty of published correspondence with ordinary readers, and indeed the dazzling period colour of many of the letters themselves, it is perhaps unsurprising that many approaches to the work have tended to lavish more attention on the content of the letters and less on the authorial commentary. To be sure, the unusual directness of authorial voice has been noted (by Carleton for instance) and the commentaries themselves have been used as a source of direct and general critical comment by the writer (Kadash is but one example); however, there has been less critical reflection on the authorial commentaries *in the context* of the work itself, and in particular on the way in which this direct authorial voice is dependent on, and indeed grows out of, the readers' voices in the letters. In fact, there remains a broad consensus that *Letters to the Writer* is primarily, if not exclusively, a documentary work.⁶¹ There are certainly important grounds for understanding the work in documentary terms: the urgent, anonymous voices in the letters shatter the complacent assumptions that lie behind hackneyed critical invocations of 'the reader', quite literally bringing the reading public to life; moreover, for someone reading today these lively voices seem to leap across an unbridgeable historical void, making them especially compelling as historical and cultural artefacts. Zoshchenko himself certainly endorses a

⁶¹ See Ibid, p.117 and p.123 and T Kadash, 'Gogol' v tvorcheskoi refleksii Zoshchenko', p. 279. Zoshchenko himself later described *Letters to the Writer* as "documentary" in the commentaries to *Youth Restored*: "And my most interesting (documentary) book, *Letters to the Writer* has also appeared" («А также выпустил мою самую интересную (документальную) книгу – "Письма к писателю"»). *Vozvrashchennaia molodost'*, 3:158. Although, interestingly, the documentary quality remains parenthetical, perhaps implying that it is not definitive, or even perhaps not the primary motivation of the work.

documentary reading of the work in the preface where he claims: "I have not compiled this book for the sake of laughter. I have compiled the book in order to show authentic and undisguised life, authentic living people with their wishes, taste and thoughts."⁶² In the same documentary spirit, he suggests of the work that: "Here, so to speak, is the breath of our life."⁶³ However, this documentary understanding is far from exhaustive; what is missed in this approach is the genesis and growing confidence of the authorial voice that greets the reader from the first page; this voice is important for it exhibits a simplicity and directness that has little if any precedent in Zoshchenko's fiction before 1929.

This authorial directness is sufficiently novel in and of itself to merit greater critical attention. In fact there are moments in the preface to the work where Zoshchenko seems to particularly invite reflection on authorship and the nature of his contribution to the collection. For instance, while anticipating charges of avarice and exploitation from hostile critics, Zoshchenko explains how he has renounced any personal monetary interest in the project so as not to gain personally from the writing of others; in the course of this pre-emptive defence, the writer ponders aloud, and at length, the actual extent of his work on the volume:

Do I in actual fact have a right to this money? What was my work here? Perhaps it was only having to leap out of bed each morning to open the door to the postman. Of course, if one thinks deeper, there was a tiny bit of work done. I read these letters attentively. I responded to almost all my correspondents. As for manuscripts alone, I read no less than a thousand of them. And my nerves? And the sleepless nights in which I pondered this book? And the work on the book itself? Day after day for two years I selected and sorted through these letters; I thought of them, of their authors. And these authors were lodged in my brain, like all the heroes of my books.

⁶² «Я не ради смеха собрал эту книгу. Я эту книгу собрал для того, чтобы показать подлинную и неприкрытую жизнь, подлинных живых людей с их желаниями, вкусом, мыслями.» *Pis'ma k pisatel'iu*, p.328.

⁶³ «Здесь, так сказать, дыхание нашей жизни.» *Ibid*, p.328.

The Devil take it! There is no money that could compensate me for this work.⁶⁴

That Zoshchenko takes such pains to articulate the extent of his contribution and the passionate nature of his commitment to the project is surely significant. As was shown in the previous chapter, *Letters to the Writer* is a work that grew out of Zoshchenko's 1926/27 breakdown; this personal significance perhaps explains some of the passion the writer so obviously attaches to the undertaking, as it does the strain on his nerves and his suggestion that the value of the work defies conceptualization in financial terms. However, what is also striking in this passage is the way that it brings the theme of authorship to the fore. In contrast to the documentary emphasis on material, the author-figure is here focussing attention on authorship itself; this erodes the more usual documentary aesthetic whereby apparently unmediated facts are made to speak for themselves, or at least to appear to be doing so.

What is equally important to note in this passage is how much of the work that Zoshchenko claims credit for involved reading: he "read" the correspondence "attentively"; "he read no fewer than a thousand manuscripts"; he "selected and sorted through" the piles of letters. If one remembers that Zoshchenko's knowledge of most of these correspondents would have been based solely on what he read in their letters, then his suggestion that "these authors were lodged in [his] brain" like his own fictional heroes serves to illustrate the depth and intensity of the act of reading that underpins *Letters to the Writer*.⁶⁵ Perhaps more importantly though, it also serves to

⁶⁴ «В самом деле – имею ли я право на эти деньги? В чем тут моя работа? Разве только в том, что я вскакивал по утрам с кровати и открывал почтальону двери. Конечно, если подумать глубже – кой-какая работишка все же была проделана. Я внимательно читал эти письма. Я отвечал почти всем корреспондентам. Одних рукописей я прочел не менее как тысячу. А мои нервы? А бессонные ночи, в которые я обдумывал эту книгу? А сама работа над книгой? Я два года изо дня в день подбирал и перебирал эти письма, думал о них, об их авторах. И эти авторы побывали у меня в мозгу, как и все герои моих книг. Черт побери! Нету денег, которыми можно оплатить мне эту работу.» Ibid, pp. 328-329.

⁶⁵ It is important to note that Igor' Sukhikh, relying on the published memoir of one of the original correspondents, has shown that in at least one case Zoshchenko not only met, but even negotiated with

bind together reading and authorship in the mind of the writer, entwining the acts of reading and writing into a single creative dialectic whose mutual dependency subverts the critical convention that tends to regard them as separate activities. Thus, the simple, direct authorial voice in *Letters to the Writer*, like its more complexly layered counterparts in *Sentimental Tales* and *The Sky-Blue Book*, emerges as much out of a sustained and careful act of reading as out of putting pen to paper; no matter how stable and straightforward it appears, it is nonetheless inseparable from the readers' letters which ground and contextualize it. Appreciating this interpenetration of reading and writing is central to achieving a balanced understanding of *Letters to the Writer* and one all too easily missed by concentrating primarily on the readers' letters. As Gregory Carleton's culturally-nuanced reading of the work demonstrates, failure to consider both sides of this dialectic together makes the work seem impenetrable and prey to an extreme interpretative instability.

Carleton helpfully locates the genesis of *Letters to the Writer* in the context of contemporary, officially-endorsed, critical attempts to understand the mass reader with a view to bridging the divide between Soviet writers and their readers.⁶⁶ This cultural context undoubtedly influenced the form and content of *Letters to the Writer*. Carleton argues that the broader critical concern with establishing the nature and needs of the mass reader offered Zoshchenko access to an important source of support

one young woman in order to obtain further material – see I Sukhikh, 'Primechaniia' in M M Zoshchenko, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 8 volumes ed. I Sukhikh, (Moscow: Vremia, 2008), volume entitled *Sentimental'nye povesti*, pp. 602-604 and N Deineka, 'Chuzhaia i malen'kaia. Moi vstrechi s M. M. Zoshchenko', *Iskusstvo Leningrada*, 1990, No. 3, pp.62-64. It must be said, however, that there is no evidence of this kind of collusion in relation to any of the other correspondents in *Letters to the Writer*. Either way, what is important in the context of this study is the literary effect that results: the work is structured on the premise that the relationship between the writer and his readers is purely epistolary; the reader is implicitly invited to accept this and much of the philosophical content of the book ultimately depends on it. That there are some instances in the writing of the book where this was not the case does not invalidate either the undertaking itself or the main argument that the book makes: *Letters to the Writer* is before all else a work of literature and thus invulnerable to sampling errors of this kind.

⁶⁶ G Carleton, *Politics of Reception*, pp. 112-129.

in the face of an increasingly vituperative critical climate, suggesting that, for Zoshchenko, “reader response became a weapon against the critical establishment”.⁶⁷ To be sure, Zoshchenko was not unaware of the extent to which an appeal to the mass reader offered an important defence at a time when so many of his contemporaries (such as Bulgakov, Zamiatin and Pil’niak) were smarting under the enthusiastic onslaught of self-styled, partisan critics. Indeed, Zoshchenko rather coyly points out in the preface of *Letters to the Writer*: “apparently, the reader perceives me in not quite the same way as the critics do.”⁶⁸ This oblique dialogue with hostile critics continues into the main body of the work; at this juncture it is worth remembering the implicit engagement with critics contained in the letter entitled “sensible criticism” (“*del'naia kritika*”), which was discussed in chapter two. However, in addition to its function as a defence against dangerous critical opprobrium, Carleton further suggests that Zoshchenko’s appeal to the mass reader constitutes a simultaneous attempt by the writer to dispel the hermeneutic recalcitrance that Carleton sees as characteristic of Zoshchenko’s work from the twenties: “for him [Zoshchenko] the reader served as a vehicle to purge his writing and, by extension, his literary profile of any semblance of ambiguity.”⁶⁹

However, Carleton finds that, *Letters to the Writer* fails to deliver on both of these points because the picture of the reader that emerges from the work is so heterogeneous. To illustrate his point, Carleton asks rhetorically:

By what criteria, motivation, or logic could one reconcile the inclusion of “Sensible Criticism” alongside the letter entitled “Drama on the Volga” [“Drama na Volge”], which is from a woman who has been slighted on a cruise by an impostor passing himself off as Zoshchenko? [...] And what place can one assign barely literate requests by infatuated readers for a photograph? Surely

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 117.

⁶⁸ «Видимо, читатель меня воспринимает не совсем так, как критика.» *Pis'ma k pisatel'iu*, p.327.

⁶⁹ G Carleton, *The Politics of Perception*, p.133.

every artist can lay claim to a similar breadth of response ranging from the serious to the ridiculous.⁷⁰

Carleton also stresses the inconsistent attitude that the author-figure exhibits towards his correspondents, sometimes adopting a stance of sincere approval and at other times that of ironic distance.⁷¹ Carleton finds in all of this proof that in *Letters to the Writer* Zoshchenko was unable to locate the coherent reader-figure he needed, both in his battles with critics and against the hermeneutic instability which he hoped to expunge from his own writing. Thus, for Carleton, the work resists definitive interpretation because of the unexpectedly “diffuse portrait” of the readership it reveals; it remains “a stubborn knot” which “resisted wholesale incorporation in any one schema”, whether that “schema” was devised by critics or by Zoshchenko himself.⁷² However, the problem with this reading is that the heterogeneity of readership which the book manifests was hardly unforeseen by Zoshchenko: in fact Zoshchenko explicitly acknowledges it in the preface: “Here, in this book, are collected the most varied letters and passions.”⁷³ Moreover, in the same preface he explicitly rejects the notion that the book aims at reaching some kind of definitive, aggregated understanding of the typical Zoshchenko reader: “I do not want to say that in this book of mine you can clap eyes on the real face of the reader. It is not quite so.”⁷⁴ In truth, Carleton overestimates the lack of coherence in *Letters to the Writer*: to be sure that coherence is not at all straightforward and it is certainly not based on any uniformity of opinion, outlook or style in the letters; on the contrary, it is based on the figure of the author himself.

⁷⁰ Ibid, p.126.

⁷¹ Ibid, pp.123-124.

⁷² Ibid, p.126. For Carleton’s suggestion that the text defies Zoshchenko’s own attempts to construct a unified mass reader see the same source, p. 134.

⁷³ «Здесь, в этой книге, собраны самые различные письма и страсти.» *Pis'ma k pisatel'iu*, p.328.

⁷⁴ «Я не хочу сказать, что в этой моей книге можно увидеть настоящее лицо читателя. Это не совсем так.» *Pis'ma k pisatel'iu*, p.327.

In answer to Carleton's rhetorical question posed above, one need look no further than the figure of the author in the search for "criteria, motivation or logic" capable of reconciling "Sensible Criticism", "Drama on the Volga" and "the barely literate requests by infatuated readers for a photograph". All of these correspondents are linked by a desire for a connection with the author in a way that extends beyond his writing; this may be in terms of critical debate ("Sensible Criticism"), acquiring possession of an authorial likeness ("barely literate requests [...] for a photograph"), or even amorous dalliance with, what later turns out to be, someone nefariously posing as the famous writer ("Drama on the Volga"). In fact, a concern with authorship and the figure of the author in the broadest sense can be seen to unite all the letters collected in this otherwise disjunctive work. In their own ways all the individual correspondents seek some sort of further knowledge of, or connection with, the author they know from the stories and tales and turn to the person of the writer in order to accomplish this. For some, such as the writer of the letter entitled "A Young Lady from Kronstadt" ("Baryshnia iz Kronshtadta"), the need is to fix the face of the author-figure, preferably in photographic form; the woman in question notes that the three portraits of the writer which she has seen "contradict each other frightfully" ("*strashno protivorechat drug drugu*"); she asks for a definitive, authorially-endorsed photograph, for on the basis of the other likenesses she has seen "it remains to suppose that either the artists drew them without looking at the original, or else you are as changeable as a chameleon."⁷⁵ The tongue-in-cheek suggestion of chameleon-like inscrutability suggests that this correspondent believes in the existence of, and earnestly searches for, a stable authorial self that only needs the correct medium in order to reveal it.

⁷⁵ «Остается предполагать, что либо художники рисовали, не видя оригинала, или Вы изменчивы, подобно хамелеону.» Ibid, p.334.

A concern with authorship is also detectable in all those letters in which textual acquaintance leads to a desire to meet the writer in person. In the case of the letter “Lialechka and Tamochka” (“Lialechka i Tamochka”), the desire of a reader to ‘flesh out’ the authorial persona even acquires a mildly flirtatious character.⁷⁶ In “A Letter from a Woman” (“Pis’mo ot zhenshchiny”), there is a more desperate tone in which the correspondent confesses to having constructed so vivid an image of the author in her mind that she has started to see him round and about like some kind of Gogolian fantasy that acquires a life of its own: “Just now I was coming from Lesnyi on Tram №9. Nearby a man was sitting who was exactly like I have imagined you to be over the past three years. Perhaps it even was you.”⁷⁷ The desire to see the author in the flesh is also a feature of “The Rendezvous that Didn’t Happen” (“Nesostoiavsheesia svidanie”); in this letter a provincial student requests a meeting because she regrets a lie told to her friends at home to the effect that she had met Zoshchenko while studying in Leningrad. What is interesting is that, in describing her regret at lying about the meeting, she says that: “I was surprised at how bad I felt about it, as if I had stolen something.”⁷⁸ Beyond the sense in which she has obviously stolen her friends’ trust, something which could presumably be made better by coming clean to them, she perhaps fears having somehow trespassed on the image of the author, something that can only be made good by meeting him in person.

Many of the letters refer directly to issues of authorship in the works themselves; the sophistication of these queries and observations varies substantially, but the common concern with authorship remains. In “A Curious Fellow” (“Liubopytnyi chelovek”), a reader simplistically equates the *skaz* narrator of

⁷⁶ Ibid, p.372.

⁷⁷ «Сейчас ехала из Лесного в трамвае №9. Рядом со мной сидел человек, именно такой, каким в течение трех лет я представляла себе Вас. Может быть, это были даже Вы.» Ibid, p.383.

⁷⁸ «[У] меня на душе было удивительно нехорошо. Такое чувство, будто бы я что-то украла.» Ibid, p.397.

Zoshchenko's comic tale 'An Historical Story' ('Istoricheskii rasskaz', 1924) with Zoshchenko himself. The *skaz* narrator in that story finishes the description of his comically insubstantial recollection of Lenin with the suggestion that those wishing "to find out the details" ("*podrobnosti uznat*") of the incident should turn "directly" ("*priamo*") to him.⁷⁹ This is precisely what this correspondent requests, betraying in his question a particular understanding of the author which, naïve and simplistic as it is, is still based on an implicit understanding of authorship.⁸⁰ In a similar vein, the writer of the letter "Of What the Nightingale Sang" seeks confirmation from Zoshchenko that the author-figure of *Of What the Nightingale Sang* was fictional and that "the whole book together with the preface was written by you personally."⁸¹ Occasionally these musings on the mode of authorship in Zoshchenko's works attain a perceptiveness that could be considered acute in any context. The writer of the letter "A Laudatory Assessment" describes his collection of Zoshchenko stories as "my medicine" ("*moe lekarstvo*") for those times "when I am infinitely sad" ("*kogda mne beskonechno grustno*").⁸² What he finds soothing in them is a kind of human lyricism within the context of the everyday which is rooted in an acute feeling of authorial presence:

In the vivid depth of the protagonists of your stories I feel the full depth of the feeling of the author and see, apart from sharp and absorbing satire, a touching compassion and good will towards the people represented.⁸³

Even when not explicitly the focus of a given letter, a concern with the nature of authorship is usually at least touched upon by, if not actually an implicit concern

⁷⁹ 'Istoricheskii rasskaz', 1:211.

⁸⁰ *Pis'ma k pisatel'iu*, p.404.

⁸¹ «Вся книга вместе с предисловием написана Вами единолично.» *Pis'ma k pisatel'iu*, p.405.

⁸² *Ibid*, p.405.

⁸³ «В дышащем рельефе лиц Ваших рассказов я чувствую всю глубину проникновения автора и вижу, кроме острой и занимательной сатиры, трогательную жалость и доброту к изображаемым людям.» *Ibid*, p.406.

of, the correspondent. All those letters suggesting anecdotes or plots that Zoshchenko might be interested in succeed only in revealing their divergence from the typical Zoshchenko story, and thus in making it clearer where the particularity of those stories might lie. In the letter “Golden Dentures” (“Zolotaia cheliust”), a correspondent suggests Zoshchenko re-work an anecdote he heard about a man who commissioned a set of golden dentures to show off to his friends and accidentally flushed them down the drain in Leningrad’s Finland station. Although the author-figure makes no comment on the suggestion other than to reject it, the reader senses that the tone of poetic justice and direct moral payback at the heart of the anecdote are utterly foreign to Zoshchenko’s artistic world.⁸⁴ Other suggestions, such as in the letters “The Watch” and “Yet More Watches”, turn out to be anecdotal re-workings of a Leskovian plot, and thus similarly serve to stimulate reflections on the nature of authorship and authorial originality.⁸⁵

In fact, the centrality of authorship in *Letters to the Writer* is implicit in the title of the work: importantly, it is not *Letters from Readers* or *Letters from the Reader*; the common factor uniting all of the collected correspondence is that it was sent *to the writer*. If all the letters constitute more or less oblique engagements with notions of the author and authorship, then this concern is mirrored by the author-figure himself. Zoshchenko made this clear in the preface that opened the work:

In conclusion I must say that it was devilishly hard to assemble this book. From the pile of dull and boring letters I took out those which seemed to me the most characteristic. For this reason my face is present in the book, my thoughts and my wishes. The book has been made like a novel.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Ibid, p.358.

⁸⁵ Ibid, pp. 359-361.

⁸⁶ «В заключение я должен сказать, что книгу эту собрать было чертовски тяжело. Из груды скучных и тупых писем я отобрал те, которые показались мне наиболее характерны. По этой причине в книге имеется мое лицо, мои мысли и мои желания. Книга сделана как роман.» Ibid. p.330.

In fact, the author figure is teased out from his correspondents' concerns with Zoshchenko the author; in a very real sense he is defined from between the lines of his readers. The author-figure that emerges in *Letters to the Writer* is really an exercise in the formation of a kind of relational selfhood. The term 'relational selfhood' actually comes from Paul Eakin's theoretical reflections on life writing in which he characterizes it in terms of "modelling the social self".⁸⁷ His approach, in fact, exhibits a significant degree of correspondence with theoretical studies of selfhood originating in the field of Slavic Studies and based variously on the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin, Lydia Ginzburg and Lev Vygotsky.⁸⁸ However, Eakin's understanding of the relational self draws on research in philosophy, psychology and the cognitive sciences, to suggest an aspect of selfhood which is "generated in conversation with others," suggesting that, to some degree at least, "our subjectivity is structured as a conversation".⁸⁹ This is precisely where the author-figure in *Letters to the Writer* comes from, and his origin in conversation with others accounts for his confidence and the unusual stability of the voice he commands.

It is important to understand this point of origin for the authorial voice in *Letters to the Writer*, because without appreciating the dialectical interdependence of it on the conversation he carries on with his readers there is a very real danger of misreading the confidence in his voice. For instance, Elizabeth Papazian finds evidence in the unambiguous authorial voice in *Letters to the Writer* of "a

⁸⁷ P J Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (Ithaca NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 61-68.

⁸⁸ See A Zorin, 'Izobretenie traditsii: o roli lichnosti v istorii nauki. Proza L. Ia. Ginzburg: humanitarnaia mysl' XX veka', *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, No. 76 (2005), pp. 45-68. See also C Emerson, 'Bakhtin, Lotman, Vygotsky and Lydia Ginzburg on Types of Self: A Tribute' in L Engelstein and S Sandler (eds), *Self and Story in Russian History* (Ithaca NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2000), pp. 20-45; and C Emerson, 'Shklovsky's *ostranenie*, Bakhtin's *vnenakhodimost'* (How Distance Serves an Aesthetic of Arousal Differently from an Aesthetic Based on Pain)', *Poetics Today*, 26:4 (Winter 2005), pp. 637-664.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

pedagogical relationship in which he [Zoshchenko] becomes, in a sense, the ‘author’ of the letter-writers’ development”.⁹⁰ While the author-figure is hardly averse to offering advice to his readers and is often candid in his appraisal of poems or stories that he receives from them, the idea that he strives to “‘author’” their development, or even that he “is *producing* them” surely misses the degree to which the author-figure himself is dependent on these very same letters from readers.⁹¹ It also fails to take notice of the extent to which the author-figure is himself a reader: if, as Papazian suggests, he is seeking the “reconstruction of the reader” then he cannot but include himself in this category.⁹²

In fact, the tenor of the author-figure’s ‘didactic’ relationship with his correspondents is far more subtle and takes place on an entirely different level to that shown by Papazian. Beyond specific advice, what Zoshchenko offers all his correspondents is the chance to read their own ‘authorial’ truths in the mirror of text, just as he has done; in this regard it is important to note that in the selection criteria discussed in the preface Zoshchenko notes that: “These letters have been mainly written by a special category of reader. This is, for the most part, a reader who wishes to become a part of ‘Great Russian Literature’.”⁹³ Of course, by publishing their letters Zoshchenko allows them to do just this, to stumble into the hallowed halls of Russian literature, but he also does something perhaps even more important: he offers them the chance to read themselves as he had read himself in works like *Sentimental Tales* and was to do in the later *The Sky-Blue Book*, the chance to read their own

⁹⁰ E A Papazian, ‘Reconstructing the (Authentic Proletarian) Reader: Mikhail Zoshchenko’s Changing Model of Authorship, 1924-1934’, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 4:4 (Fall 2003), p. 832.

⁹¹ Ibid, p. 832. Emphasis is Papazian’s.

⁹² Ibid, p. 836.

⁹³ «Эти письма, главным образом, написаны особой категорией читателя. Это, по большей части, читатель, желающий влиться в ‘великую русскую литературу’.» *Pis'ma k pisatel'iu*, pp. 327-328.

‘author-function’ and derive their own relational understanding of themselves and the nature of their selfhood.

An example of this can be pieced together from the case of Nina Deineka. This young woman wrote a memoir of her correspondence and meetings with Zoshchenko which culminated in the inclusion of some of her letters with him in *Letters to the Writer*.⁹⁴ She initially wrote a personal letter to Zoshchenko to which she appended some of her unpublished poetry with the aim of soliciting his opinion. The letter describes her troubled youth (including allegations of what today at least would be considered child abuse) and her personal misery at the apparent hopelessness of her situation; the letter developed into the extended correspondence which is included in *Letters to the Writer* in the section entitled ‘Everything is Alright’ (‘Vse v poriadke’).⁹⁵ The poetry, however, was hived off and included in a later section called ‘A Bad Youth’ (‘Plokhaia molodost’);⁹⁶ according to Deineka, Zoshchenko himself composed the accompanying letter to this section⁹⁷. Importantly, there is no explicit indication in *Letters to the Writer* that the personal letters in the earlier section and the poetry in the later one were written by the same person; the only (very vague) clue is that the titles to the sections do not really make sense and only have any meaning if switched around. The point of this separation would seem to be a similar one to that made in the comic story ‘The Writer’ from back in 1923 (discussed in chapter three): that while the personal aspects of the literary text continue to haunt the writer, they remain invisible to others, demonstrating that the personal misery related in the first section leaves no objective textual trace on the

⁹⁴ This is the same N Deineka whose memoir is used by Sukhikh to suggest a degree of collusion between Zoshchenko and some of his correspondents (see footnote above): N Deineka, ‘Chuzhaia i malen’kaia’.

⁹⁵ *Pis'ma k pisateliu*, pp. 386-396.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 415-418.

⁹⁷ N Deineka, ‘Chuzhaia i malen’kaia’, p. 63.

poetry printed in the later section. Crucially, the connection between the two sections is only knowable today because of Deineka's memoir; thus, the point about the anonymity of the written self implicit in the separation of the personal letters from the poetry as elucidated above is something that would have been for the eyes of the original correspondent only, not for the general reader.

This profoundly personal gesture, shot through as it is with Zoshchenko's own meditations on authorship and made in a published work, perfectly captures the sense in which Zoshchenko offers his correspondents the chance to read themselves in the mirror of literature. Unfortunately, however, Deineka's memoir seems to suggest that she did not interpret it this way: in fact, she expresses some hurt that, as she sees it, her letters were published "under the knowingly ironic title 'Everything is Alright', with its hopeless summing up".⁹⁸ Elsewhere in her account she complains of Zoshchenko's cold, literary response when she tried to make *post factum* revisions to her letters: "And for him I was already not me – the little girl Ninochka to whom he was being so sympathetic, I was the literary figure that he was struggling for."⁹⁹ In a sense she is, of course, absolutely correct; that is precisely what Zoshchenko offers her: a reflection of her selfhood in text that she can read back, a purely written selfhood that is both recognisable yet also different from Deineka's own sense of herself. That she does not do this, however, in no way invalidates the gesture. In view of this complex episode, one begins to see what Zoshchenko meant by suggesting that his need to write the book was fuelled by the fact that: "I am unable and have no right to hold such exceptional material in my writing desk."¹⁰⁰ The Deineka episode reveals

⁹⁸ «[...] под понимающе-ироническим, как бы подводящим безнадежный итог заголовком "Все в порядке"». Ibid, p. 64.

⁹⁹ «И для него была уже не я – девушка Ниночка, к которой он так участливо отнесся, я была литературным образом, за который он боролся.» Ibid, p. 62.

¹⁰⁰ «[Я] не могу и не имею права держать в своем письменном столе такой исключительный материал.» *Pis'ma k pisateliu*, p.327.

a work that, if not quite didactic enough to be called pedagogical, may perhaps be understood as a textual mirror held up, without obligation or suggested interpretation, to his cherished readership. In this it perhaps offers them the same opportunity of reading their own relational selfhood in textual conversation with others that the author himself derived from their letters: giving back to them what they had given him.

The phenomenon of the author-figure in textual conversation with others is also an important aspect of 'Story of a Reforging' ('Istoriia odnoi perekovki', 1934).¹⁰¹ This piece emerged directly from the infamous expedition of Soviet writers to the newly completed White Sea-Baltic Canal, an undertaking in which Zoshchenko took an active part. Zoshchenko's story originally formed the twelfth chapter of the notorious, collectively authored *Stalin White Sea-Baltic Canal: The History of its Construction 1931-1934* (*Belomorsko-Baltiiskii kanal imeni Stalina: istoriia stroitel'stva 1931-1934 gg*, 1934 – henceforth *Belomorkanal*) which was the textual end-product of the expedition. *Belomorkanal* is obviously a seriously compromised work: taken together, its contributions constitute a paean to forced labour whose politically driven myth-making systematically misrepresents its unpalatable subject matter; the work was sponsored by and organized under the auspices of the OGPU and, for those reading it today, the collection as a whole can only raise the most serious questions about the ethics of writing.¹⁰² Zoshchenko's enthusiastic participation in the project would thus seem to constitute an uncharacteristic lapse of ethical judgement on the part of a writer who otherwise managed to negotiate the

¹⁰¹ See M Gor'kii, L Averbakh, S Firin eds, *Belomorsko-Baltiiskii kanal imeni Stalina: istoriia stroitel'stva 1931-1934 gg* (Moscow: OGIZ, 1934), Reprinted 1998, pp. 493-524. It was also published separately in 1934 under the more politically neutral title 'Story of a Life' ('Istoriia odnoi zhizni').

¹⁰² The story of the composition of *Belomorkanal* and a discussion of the ethical and political stakes involved can be gleaned from Dariusz Tolczyk's *See No Evil: Literary Cover-ups and Discoveries of the Soviet Camp Experience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) and Cynthia Ruder's *Making History for Stalin: The Story of the Belomor Canal* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998).

difficult years of the thirties with a reputation for personal integrity, decency and honour that was rare enough among his contemporaries.¹⁰³ This ethical lapse on the part of the writer goes a long way towards accounting for the relative critical neglect of the story; as Elizabeth Papazian suggests, ‘Story of a Reforging’ remains “one of the lacunae” in Zoshchenko criticism, either being passed over in stunned silence or being analyzed in predominantly ethical and political terms.¹⁰⁴ However, as important as these ethical and political concerns are, and as suggested above they are extremely important, the particularities of the text itself are all too easily eclipsed by the magnitude of the reader’s understandable moral perplexity. This is unfortunate, for beyond its deplorable political context, the story has an important (and largely non-political) function in the genesis of Zoshchenko’s literary experiments with authorship analyzed so far in this chapter. It is perhaps this latter aspect that helps to explain Zoshchenko’s baffling seduction by the *Belomorkanal* project and his reluctance as late as 1954 to distance himself from his contribution in particular and indeed *Belomorkanal* as a whole.¹⁰⁵ However, with the benefit of historical (and political) distance, it is perhaps possible now to see a way to condemning the undertaking in political and ethical terms, while at the same time cautiously mining the surviving text for anything of value.

In fact, extracting meaning from another text is central to the whole aesthetic structure of Zoshchenko’s story itself: it is constructed as the explicit re-working of an

¹⁰³ See L Milne, *Zoshchenko and the Ilf-Petrov Partnership*, pp.89-92.

¹⁰⁴ E A Papazian, ‘Reconstructing the (Authentic Proletarian) Reader’, p. 840. Papazian is an obvious exception to this trend; she analyzes the story in terms of an avant-garde striving for reconstruction of the reader which she imputes to Zoshchenko (see pp. 837-839 of the same source). Linda Scatton looks beyond the political context of the story to stress the way in which the piece partakes in a broader interest in life writing which she identifies across a number of Zoshchenko’s works - see L Scatton, *Evolution of a Writer*, pp. 118-121.

¹⁰⁵ See L Milne, *Zoshchenko and the Ilf-Petrov Partnership*, p.91. Importantly, by 1954 it would have been perfectly expedient to renounce the project. In fact, even in 1937 when Gor’kii was dead, and Iagoda, Averbakh and Firin (the other forces behind the collection) had all been consumed by the Great Purge, the book fell into official disrepute and was not reprinted.

autobiographical outline originally written independently of Zoshchenko by one of the convict labourers working on the scheme. The story opens with a typical Zoshchenko authorial introduction, in which the reader learns that the writer of the original autobiographical account was a former thief and con-man called Abram Isaakovich Rottenberg who “several days before his release wrote his biography”;¹⁰⁶ the reader is further told by the author-figure that “this biography was given to me [Zoshchenko] for literary re-working.”¹⁰⁷ In view of the uncomfortable provenance of *Belomorkanal*, the passive voice in that last sentence sounds particularly ominous, but in addition to evoking the invisible hand of the OGPU, the passive construction also serves to emphasize the otherness of the textual source in a purely literal sense and thus also the distance between the author-figure and the writer of the original account. Importantly, Rottenberg did not give the manuscript to Zoshchenko directly; as was the case with the reader’s letters that were published in *Letters to the Writer* five years previously, Zoshchenko’s knowledge of his subject is largely textual.

This point is reflected and reinforced in the story by the fact that the reader also comes to know the reformed criminal only through his retold story; there is absolutely no direct authorial comment on him or his character, save a short summing up at the end. Rottenberg’s story is separated from the authorial introduction both typographically and, more importantly, by voice. The plot-driven, autobiographical account of the convict’s life is narrated in the first person and deploys a lively, consciously unliterary register which retains a piquant sense of the criminal underworld which it evokes. In fact, but for the disclosure of the authorial position in the introduction, Rottenberg’s story would have been a perfect *skaz* narrative in the mould of much of the comic fiction of the twenties. It also makes for quite an exciting

¹⁰⁶ «[...] за несколько дней до своего выхода на волю написал свою биографию»; *Belomorkanal*, p. 495.

¹⁰⁷ «[Э]ту биографию дали мне для литературной обработки.» Ibid, p. 495.

read in its own right; it is a colourful narrative brimming with exotic foreign locations, gambling dens, dancing girls and brushes with the law. Rottenberg's criminal speciality is counterfeit gold and diamonds, a metier which elevates him from small-time thieving and confidence trickery in the back streets of pre-revolutionary Tiflis to the life of an international criminal operating in Turkey, Greece and Egypt. It also leads to the painful loss of his first love, forsaken in the pursuit of crime, as well as to various periods of incarceration and hard labour in the Tsarist, British and Soviet penal systems.

Whereas his stays in pre-revolutionary and foreign prisons only serve to deepen Rottenberg's recidivism, when he enters the Soviet penal system and is sent to work on White Sea-Baltic canal he is comprehensively reformed by corrective labour; he becomes a shock worker, is decorated for outstanding productivity and comes to renounce his life of crime, apparently for good. This is undoubtedly the heavy-handed political point that the Rottenberg story, which was passed to Zoshchenko, was supposed to achieve: the depiction of Soviet penal practice as progressive and civilising by comparison to its bourgeois counterparts and predecessors. Importantly, in Zoshchenko's re-telling of Rottenberg's biography in 'Story of a Reforging', there is no attempt made to soften the over-played ideological notes that result from this political subtext. For instance, the reader is rightly suspicious when told how Rottenberg received paternal ideological advice in the form of a friendly motivational chat over tea and biscuits with camp guards;¹⁰⁸ even without the benefit of post-Soviet insight into the nature of the Gulag and the state security apparatus, this episode simply does not ring true in the story's forced labour context and stands out as a badly-written stab at political myth-making. The author-figure naively pretends not to

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 518.

hear these aesthetically-intrusive, politically-motivated, discordant notes, but they remain for everyone else to hear and ponder.

At the close of Rottenberg's story, the author-figure sums up by offering three possible ways of interpreting Rottenberg's re forging: either "he has really changed his consciousness and really re forged himself having come up against the right system of corrective education";¹⁰⁹ or it was a self-interested decision based on the realisation that in the new socialist order "the criminal world is really going to the wall" ("*pristupnomu miru deistvitel'no prikhodit krakh*") and so consequently criminals need "to re-qualify themselves" ("*perekvalifitsirovat'sia*");¹¹⁰ or else "he had pulled a new 'swindle'" ("*on sdela l novuiu 'aferu*").¹¹¹ In spite of the fact that the preceding story offered plenty of grounds for scepticism about Rottenberg's transformation, the author-figure opts for the first explanation; importantly though, he offers absolutely no explanation as to why, only asserting rather cryptically that "I am as sure of this as I am of myself."¹¹² It may not appear much, but this self-referential aside is in fact extremely important in understanding why the author-figure reaches the conclusion he does; it suggests a very personal take on the Rottenberg narrative on the part of the author-figure and an even more personal concern with re forging and self-reform in general.

In fact, it is precisely this personal fascination with re forging *per se* which animates the whole Rottenberg story. At the very beginning of the tale, before the reformed conman has even been mentioned, the author-figure reveals his interest in stories of re forging; implying that he is seeking instances of the most radical self-transformation, he asserts that he is primarily interested in those "people who had

¹⁰⁹ «[...] действительно изменил свое сознание и действительно перековался, столкнувшись с правильной системой воспитания.» Ibid, p. 524.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, p. 524.

¹¹¹ Ibid, p. 524.

¹¹² «И в этом я так же уверен, как в самом себе.» Ibid, p. 524.

been deeply drawn into a life built on idleness, theft, cheating, robberies and killings.”¹¹³ He admits that at first he “approached the question of re-education with scepticism” (“*skepticheski podoshel k voprosu perevospitaniia*”), supposing that it arose primarily through “the wish to curry favour” (“*zhelanie vysluzhit'siia*”) or “the wish to get freedom, benefits and advantages” (“*zhelanie poluchit' voliu, blaga i l'goty*”).¹¹⁴ However, the author-figure quickly renounces this scepticism, asserting that:

I must say that, on a general reckoning, I was desperately mistaken. And I in fact saw the reconstruction of consciousness, the pride of the construction workers and the surprising change in the psyche of many prisoners.¹¹⁵

Crucially, this declaration comes in a passage bearing the strange subtitle ‘Conclusion’ (“*Zakliuchenie*”); this is baffling because it comes in the second page of the story before the reader has seen or heard anything of Rottenberg. The point is that the authorial conclusion is largely set in advance and, in a play on the word “*zakliuchenie*” (which also means detention or incarceration in Russian), this authorial conclusion ‘incarcerates’ the remainder of the tale. Thus, the author-figure is able to say only two pages into his story of reforging that:

On a general reckoning, as far as I was able to see, not one person, having gone through the severe school of corrective education, remained precisely as they had been.

Almost all, in one way or another, were positively reforged.

¹¹³ «Люди, которые глубоко втянулись в жизнь, построенную на праздности, воровстве, обмане, грабежах и убийствах.» Ibid, p. 493.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, p. 494.

¹¹⁵ «Я должен сказать, что в общем счете я чрезвычайно ошибся. И я на самом деле увидел перестройку сознание, гордость строителей и удивительное изменение психики у многих заключенных.» Ibid, p.494.

And, if this reforging would make ideal people out of all law breakers then the pen of the satirist would henceforth rust from standing idle.¹¹⁶

It must be said that in this declaration, the qualifications are just as important as the assertions; in particular the conditional-subjunctive mood of the last sentence casts the sentiment as a heartfelt desire rather than an anticipation of an accomplished fact. Nonetheless, the overcoming of the author-figure's scepticism about personal transformation and his newly found belief in reforging has been asserted unambiguously.

This, of course, raises the question as to exactly whose reforging is referred to in the title of the story; the reader naturally assumed that it was Rottenberg's, but it might equally be held to be that of the author-figure himself. This is really a question of the connection between the author-figure and Rottenberg; it is a question that is broached in concrete terms by examining the extent of Zoshchenko's re-working of Rottenberg's original account. The reader is not given Rottenberg's original account; although the author-figure describes it as "extraordinary" (*"neobychaina"*) it was not without serious defects: "His biography, written quite carelessly, with many literary infelicities, prolixities and repetitions, could, unfortunately, not be published without corrections."¹¹⁷ These corrections, as described by the author-figure, actually sound quite heavy; he calls the revisions "a task of extraordinary difficulty" (*"zadacha neobychainoi trudnosti"*) and says of the original manuscript:

¹¹⁶ В общем же счете, сколько мне удалось увидеть, ни один человек, прошедший суровую школу перевоспитания, не остался именно таким, как был. / Все почти в той или иной мере получили положительную перековку. / А если эта перековка сделала бы из всех правонарушителей идеальных людей – перо сатирика заржавело бы в дальнейшем от бездействия.» Ibid, p.494.

¹¹⁷ «Его биографию, написанную несколько небрежно, со многими литературными погрешностями, длиннотами и повторениями, нельзя было, к сожалению, печатать без исправлений.» Ibid, p.495.

Here the composition of the piece was complicated and confused, and it would have been difficult for the reader to follow the events. Here was a dead fabric which it was necessary to bring to life with the breath of literature.¹¹⁸

The work here sounds significant, even possibly intrusive; however, this picture is softened slightly when the author-figure suggests a little later in the same section that:

I 'dragged a comb through' this manuscript; but I did this as if by the hand of the author himself. I preserved his language, his style, his ignorance of literature and his personal character. This was almost the work of a jeweller.¹¹⁹

The suggestion here is more of a stylized re-working based on a deep empathy with the author; what it recalls is that sense of reading his correspondents in *Letters to the Writer* noted earlier, work of such intensity that Zoshchenko claimed it approached that of the creation of literary characters. Particularly revealing in this passage is that jeweller metaphor: the author-figure depicts his work as that of cutting and setting a raw but precious substance so as to release its own hidden natural beauty. This is an evocative metaphor for the kind of creative reading that the author-figure engages in; it is an art based on the reading of natural potential and without any claim to creation *ex nihilo*; it also stands as the exact opposite of Rottenberg's pet scam which involved the criminal conjuring of "cut diamonds" ("*brillianty*") from "stones" ("*kamni*"), without any of the attendant labour.¹²⁰ The result of this creative reading is a typically contradictory mix of reading and writing: "And so, here is this surprising story of the life of a man, written by himself, so to speak, and 'guided

¹¹⁸ «Тут композиция вещи сложна и запутана, и читателю было бы трудно следить за событиями. Тут была мертвая ткань, которую надо было оживить дыханием литературы.» Ibid, pp. 495-496.

¹¹⁹ «Я 'причесал' эту рукопись. Но я сделал это как бы рукой самого автора. Я сохранил его язык, его стиль, его незнание литературы и собственный его характер. Это была почти что ювелирная работа.» Ibid, p. 496.

¹²⁰ Ibid, p. 501 and p. 503.

around' by my hand."¹²¹ Here "'guided around'" can be read two ways: "obvedennaia" can mean being led by, but it can also mean being surrounded by. This ambiguous authorial presence in the re-worked tale can perhaps best be understood by a similar reading (and then writing) of authorial self into the text of the other that was encountered in *Letters to the Writer*. Whereas in the earlier work, the act of reading was more openly staged by the inclusion of the original letters, in the later work, although the original is missing, the act of reading is no less obviously asserted. What the reader is presented with is the self already read into the text of the other, but, although not present, the effect of that other text is not effaced; it is referred to throughout the story and is markedly present by its very absence.

In order to understand precisely what aspect of himself the author-figure reads into Rottenberg's biography one need look only to the one piece of extra-textual knowledge of the reformed convict that the author admits to. He claims to have heard Rottenberg speak at an officially organized meeting of shock workers convened at one of the camps along the canal.¹²² In fact it is one part of his speech in particular which lodges in the mind of the author-figure:

'The bourgeois professor Lombroso says that we criminals are already born as criminals. What rubbish. Can criminals really be born that way? My father is an honest toiler – he works to this day. My mother is an honest worker. But what happened to me – I repent of this and am walking away from this for good.'¹²³

What most impresses the author-figure about Rottenberg, before seeing a syllable of his autobiography, is his impassioned affirmation of belief in the plasticity of the self

¹²¹ «Итак, вот эта удивительная история жизни человека, написанная им самым, так сказать, и 'обведенная' моей рукой.» Ibid, p. 496.

¹²² Ibid, pp. 494-495.

¹²³ «'Буржуазный профессор Ломброзо говорит, что мы, преступники, уже рождены преступниками. Какая чушь. Разве могут рождаться преступники? Мой отец – честный труженик – до сих пор работает. Моя мать – честная работница. А то, что случилось со мной, – я в этом раскаиваюсь и от этого окончательно уйду.'» Ibid, p. 495.

and the capacity for personal adaptation and change. Tellingly, the convict refers to Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909), the originator of a biological theory of criminology which located criminal tendencies in biological atavism and thus posited criminality as more or less congenital. Thus, in a more particular sense, it is Rottenberg's categorical rejection of an immutable, scientifically-determined understanding of human character and his passionate insistence on the human capacity for self-reform that attracts the narrator's attention and, by extension, defines the concerns of the story from the outset.

The extent to which this aspect of Rottenberg's story genuinely affected Zoshchenko can be gauged by the fact that it re-appeared in a startlingly similar formulation in the very different context of *Before Sunrise* almost a decade later: after describing his Crimean breakdown and immediately before commencing his formal attempt to understand his melancholia, the narrator ponders the same question of biological essence when he asks himself:

[C]ould I have been born so weak and sensitive or did something happen in my life which harmed my nerves, damaged them and made me an unhappy speck of dust driven and whirled by any wind that blows? And suddenly it dawned on me that I could not be born so unhappy and so defenceless. I could be born weak or scrofulous; I could be born with one hand, with one eye, or without an ear; but to be born in order to be depressed, and depressed without reason – because the world seemed vulgar! [...] No, I could not have been born such a freak.¹²⁴

These two works differ markedly in context and theme, but the heart-felt rejection of a life fixed at the outset by biological determinism is strikingly comparable. It is really this affirmation of the human capacity for transformation that the author-figure

¹²⁴ «[Р]одился ли я таким слабым и чувствительным или в моей жизни что-нибудь случилось такое, что повредило мои нервы, испортило их и сделало меня несчастной пылинкой, которую гонит и мотает любой ветер? И вдруг мне показалось, что я не мог родиться таким несчастным, таким беззащитным. Я мог родиться слабым, золотушным, я мог родиться с одной рукой, с одним глазом, без уха. Но родиться, чтоб хандрить, и хандрить без причины – оттого, что мир кажется пошлым! [...] Нет, я не мог родиться таким уродом.» 3:461-462.

reads in Rottenberg's story and which accounts for his reading of his own concerns into Rottenberg's story; that this same sentiment can be detected later in *Before Sunrise* shows that this need on the part of the author to believe in the plasticity of the self is based, in his case, on his own concerns with melancholia.

It is interesting to note that, just as with Rottenberg, biological determinism is rejected in *Before Sunrise* primarily through the passionate assertion of personal belief, and not through a logical, theoretical or empirical refutation: Rottenberg's rejection of hereditary criminology on the basis of his parents' virtue depends on so simplistic a view of genetic inheritance as to be meaningless as a scientific proof; likewise, a genuinely physiological theory of the mind would not validate the disparity between bodily and mental birth defects that the author-figure of *Before Sunrise* advances with such conviction. Both of these statements are characterised more by passion than proof, more by belief than argument. It is precisely because his assertion of the plasticity of self is powered by the force of conviction that the author-figure in 'Story of a Reforging' asserts his belief in the sincerity of Rottenberg's personal reconstruction, and why he does so without even trying to advance any real proof. It is the very authorial self in Rottenberg's account that leads him to assert: "I am as sure of this as I am of myself."

The 'read' authorial presence analyzed in this chapter constitutes the establishing of the existence of a self in language through reading, be that through reading the author-function of one's own works or through reading oneself in the textual productions of others. This process reveals a self already alive in language in defiance of the melancholic denial of symbolic selfhood. It thus functions as a potential escape from the ambivalent melancholic textual selfhood analyzed in chapter three and that so characterised the works of the twenties. Crucially, a self alive in

language is already a malleable self, one open to re-reading and re-writing, but without the effacement of the original written self that underlies it. To be sure, there remains a discrepancy between that 'read' selfhood and the prelapsarian melancholic selfhood that preceded it, but this is ameliorated through the trope of adaptation, an established cultural narrative in the Soviet context. The result is an oddly broken, self-interrogating language that is at once appropriate to an era of historical flux, but is also perhaps even more appropriate to the split melancholic self for it urges adaptation and facilitates a plasticity of self, while simultaneously retaining the memory of a prelapsarian, melancholic selfhood within the "safety net of the past tense". This is a language with a melancholic sense of memory, one which achieves an openness to becoming and a willingness to adapt, while preserving a sense of its past, its origins and thus the struggle required in reconciling the two.

Chapter 6

Literature and Medicine

The previous two chapters have argued that *Of What the Nightingale Sang*, and its subsequent development into *Sentimental Tales*, marked a watershed moment in Zoshchenko's literary evolution in general, and his melancholic aesthetic in particular. This work introduced the important theme of self-reading into Zoshchenko's later work, and with it the connected phenomenon of a fictionalized, parody author-figure; these two innovations became increasingly marked features of the writer's subsequent longer works, undergoing significant development in the context of sophisticated experiments in literary form. As has been suggested throughout the previous two chapters, these developments had enormous significance in terms of writing melancholia; however, it is important to note that in and of themselves they do not yet constitute a language of melancholia in the broadly Kristevan sense adopted by this study. They remain techniques for the "literary representation" of melancholia; they are sophisticated textual devices capable of translating the melancholic self into text and thus capturing in language some of the symbolic abdication at the heart of the melancholic condition; however, they do not yet attain what Kristeva describes as "elaboration". Elaboration is that explicitly therapeutic step which strives to outline the pattern of psychic processes underlying melancholic alienation and to forge a discourse capable of directly influencing these primary psychological processes with the aim of tying them more closely into the realm of symbolic discourse.¹ For Kristeva, it is this step that distinguishes the therapeutic from the purely artistic and it is precisely this elaborative step that sets *Youth Restored* (*Vozvrashchennaia molodost'*, 1933) and *Before Sunrise* (*Pered voskhodom solntsa*, 1943) apart in

¹ J Kristeva, *Black Sun*, pp. 24-25 and pp. 65-66. Kristeva's concept of elaboration is discussed in some detail in the first chapter of this study.

Zoshchenko's oeuvre. These works combine the innovations in form and authorial voice analyzed earlier in an explicitly therapeutic context; they thus manage to weave these textual innovations into a kind of therapeutic language appropriate to Soviet cultural possibilities: a genuinely Soviet language of melancholia. *Before Sunrise*, being the end-point of Zoshchenko's literary therapy, will be discussed in the next chapter; however, the roots of this language lie in the early 1930s and are connected with the appearance of *Youth Restored*.

The theme broached in *Youth Restored* is purportedly that of lost youth: hence the title. In fact, the title is simultaneously revealing and misleading in this regard: the implication of youth possessed, then lost, then restored (and quite possibly even to be lost again with time) posits a slight distance, even at this early stage, between the work and the mythical theme of 'eternal youth' that it might otherwise evoke.² However, if eternal youth is not achieved in any actual sense (and when the reader gets onto the work itself this is glaringly confirmed), then the youth in the title becomes something of a suggestive metaphor without a definite referent. The nature of this metaphorical referent becomes a little clearer when the reader moves onto the opening sentence: "This is a tale about how one Soviet man, burdened by years, illnesses and melancholia, wanted to return his lost youth."³ It is significant (so significant in fact that it is set in its own paragraph) that chief among the symptoms of the senescence that the book explores is melancholia; it will be remembered from the first chapter that the equation of melancholia and old age was long established in the European tradition of writing about melancholia, but it is also instantly recognisable

² Some contemporaries failed to discern the way *Youth Restored* distances itself from the idea of eternal youth with a detrimental impact on their reception of the work: Nemilov's hostile reading of the book, for instance, is dependent to no little degree on his rather unconvincing characterisation of the central story in *Youth Restored* as a kind of Zoshchenkavian Faust. See A Nemilov, 'Mikh Zoshchenko i problema omolozheniia', *Kniga i proletarskaia revoliutsiia*, No.9, 1934, p. 96.

³ «Это есть повесть о том, как один советский человек, обремененный годами, болезнями и меланхолией, захотел вернуть свою утраченную молодость.» 3:6.

from similar instances encountered earlier in Zoshchenko's fiction: one thinks particularly of *Sentimental Tales*. In addition it is interesting to note at this stage that the opening line posits the defeat of age and melancholia in terms of active desire: this creates a slight ambiguity with the title which posits the restored youth as something already achieved, quite possibly as the outcome of a passive process. In fact, this note of ambiguity is never finally resolved, and the extent to which mental well-being is dependent on an active or passive process grows into one of the book's central themes.

That the concern of the book is with melancholia as much as with senescence *per se* is developed beyond the opening line in a series of playful, comic references. At one point, when the author-figure is explaining how his knowledge of medicine falls short of what might be termed "completely solid" ("okonchatel'no tverdoe"), he asserts that, for instance, he would not know:

Where such and such happens and why it happens, what this or that is called in Greek, and what exactly is cancer, and on which side of the population the kidneys are, and for what purpose nature fixed man up with a spleen, and why, in essence, this tangled and even quite paltry organ is called by this pretty flippant name, which noticeably lowers human nature from its usual grandeur.⁴

The extended and confusing comic reference to the spleen only begins to make a little sense when it is recalled from the discussion in chapter one that in classical humoristic medicine the spleen is the organ charged with the regulation of black bile and so its impaired function is directly responsible for the genesis of black moods and melancholia. It is particularly noteworthy how carried away the author-figure gets in

⁴ «[...] где чего бывает, и зачем бывает, и как то или иное по-гречески называется, и что такое рак, и в каком боку у населения почки, и для какой цели природа пристроила человеку селезенку, и почему, в сущности, этот запутанный и даже отчасти мизерный орган называется этим довольно-таки легкомысленным названием, заметно снижающим человеческую природу в ее обычном величии.» 3:9.

his discussion of the spleen in the passage above, a key aspect being the author-figure's professed ignorance of the dark workings of this "paltry organ".

Melancholia and aging are perhaps more explicitly associated in a playful passage in which the author-figure asserts that with the onset of age not only are people "afflicted with surprising and even incomprehensible illnesses" ("*ikh zakhvatyvaet raznye udivitel'nye i dazhe neponiatnye bolezni*"), but also:

These sick people are also afflicted by more comprehensible illnesses and, so to speak, generally accessible ones, which are described in textbooks, like, for example, melancholia, dropsy, paralyses, diabetes, tuberculosis and so on, and so forth, and suchlike.⁵

The inclusion of "melancholia" in a list of "more comprehensible illnesses" is comically provocative: it really more obviously belongs in the former category of puzzling disorders "from which doctors fall into a state of wise contemplation and grow anxious about the powerlessness of their profession."⁶ This comic juxtaposition of course satirizes some of the pretensions of the medical profession, but at the same time it also places special emphasis on melancholia and reinforces the book's concern with this particular aspect of senescence.

After its unusual thematic concerns, the next most striking feature of *Youth Restored* is surely its highly original form; as Tsesar' Vol'pe noted in a perceptive contemporary reading, "Zoshchenko's new tale astounds at once with its originality of genre."⁷ The author-figure in fact draws attention to this novelty early on, suggesting

⁵ «Этих больных захватывают также болезни более понятные и, так сказать, общедоступные, описанные в учебниках, как, например: меланхолия, водняк, параличи, сахарная болезнь, туберкулез, и так далее, и тому подобное, и прочее.» 3:10.

⁶ От которых врачи впадают в мудрое созерцательное состояние и приходят в беспокойство за беспомощность своей профессии.» 3:10.

⁷ «Новая повесть Зощенко поражает сразу же своим жанровым своеобразием.» Ts Vol'pe, *Iskusstvo nepokhozhesti*, p. 230.

that “on this occasion our tale bears scant similarity to the usual little literary pieces.”⁸

The book is organized in the form of a novella made up of thirty-five chapters and an appended commentary which is linked to the novella through a system of endnotes. The novella is composed of a lengthy introduction and a tale which forms the kernel of the work; the tale itself only begins at chapter seventeen and continues up to chapter thirty-five, making up only about one-third of the complete book. The commentary constitutes just under half of the completed volume and the remainder is made up by the extended introduction to the novella which is referred to early on as a “scientific discussion” (“*nauchnoe rassuzhdenie*”).⁹

This introductory scientific discussion adopts a direct and factual approach that is allied to a chatty, at times even playful, narrative style that recalls any number of works of scientific popularization. There is also a mock innocent irony in this opening section which is hardly consonant with a genuine work of popular science; but it does not entirely spoil the parody of the genre, and does not prevent the central concerns of the book being articulated with a reasonable degree of clarity. In this vein, the author-figure notes that:

Well, up to the age of about thirty-five, as far as the author has been able to note, people live tolerably, they work in their individual field, make merry, recklessly spend what is granted them by nature, but after this, for the most part, there begins a rapid fading and the onset of old age.

Their taste for many good things gets lost. Their mugs grow dull. Their eyes gaze with sadness on many proper and recently loved things.¹⁰

⁸ «Наша повесть на этот раз мало похожа на обычные литературные вещицы.» 3:7.

⁹ 3:8. In the edition of *Youth Restored* used for this study the relative proportions are made up thus: introduction pp. 6-24; tale pp. 24-79; commentary pp. 80-160.

¹⁰ «Ну, еще лет до тридцати пяти, сколько мог заметить автор, люди живут сносно, трудятся на своем поприще, веселятся, тратят безрассудно то, что им отпущено природой, а после этого по большей части начинается у них бурное увядание и приближение к старости. / У них пропадает вкус ко многим хорошим вещам. Морда у них тускнеет. Ихние глаза с грустью взирают на многие приличные и недавно любимые вещи.» 3: 10.

This aged outlook then translates into any number of diseases (including the supposedly “comprehensible” melancholia) which leads these people to head off “with their sicknesses and suitcases to various sanatoria and sea coasts in search of their lost youth”.¹¹ This course of action not only fails, but in fact “makes them still more ill”, and they turn in desperation to medical science.¹²

The doctors administer all sorts of treatments “with a scientific purpose” (“*nauchnoi tsel'iu*” – pointedly not a human one), and even try to persuade the patient that their illness is something imaginary, even a sort of fantasy as it were, without any basis in reality at all”.¹³ This just “confuses the simple-hearted patient” (“*zaputyvayet prostodushnogo bol'nogo*”) and hastens his end, “not having found out in the end what, really, happened to him and what fatal mistake he made in his life.”¹⁴ Anticipating the accusation that these observations are anecdotal, or that they represent the mental particularities of Soviet culture characterised as it is by “war, revolution and the whole, so to speak, distinctiveness of our everyday life”, the author-figure turns to the biographies of the great and the good across history.¹⁵ Here he finds:

Even more rapid fading, even more complex and inscrutable diseases, even more terrible melancholia, depression, disenchantment, contempt for people, hypochondria and even more early death could be seen on this, so to speak, great intelligentsia front.¹⁶

¹¹ «Захворавшие, выезжают тогда поскорей со своими болезнями и чемоданами на разные курорты и побережья в поисках своей утраченной молодости.» 3:10.

¹² «Еще более от этого хворают»; 3:10.

¹³ «[...] нечто воображаемое, вроде как бы даже фантазия, не имеющая под собой никакой реальной почвы»; 3:10.

¹⁴ «[...] не узнав окончательно, что, собственно, с ним случилось и какую роковую ошибку он совершил в своей жизни.» 3:10-11.

¹⁵ «[...] войной, революцией и всем, так сказать, своеобразием нашего быта»; 3:11.

¹⁶ «Еще более бурное увядание, еще более сложные и непостижимые болезни, еще более ужасную меланхолию, хандру, разочарование, презрение к людям, ипохондрию и еще более раннюю смерть можно было видеть на этом, так сказать, великом интеллигентском фронте.» 3:11.

Of those who do not die young, many turn out to have lived lives of attenuated creativity beyond middle age, condemned to writing mere commentaries on the vanished glories of their youth:

They gave up their famous work, they lay about for whole days on ottomans in torn felt shoes, smoked pipes, grieved, fought with their wives, cried and moaned, and for the sake of boredom and so as to lose themselves in reverie, they wrote memoirs about their wonderful heroic youth or composed theological and religious tracts in as far as this trivial purpose does not require inspiration and full, surging, creative health, élan and that physical well-being which was there in youth.¹⁷

The author-figure acknowledges that not all great men fade beyond middle age, but he opines that those who manage not to, apparently “more often than not atheists and materialists” (*“chashche vsego bezbozhniki i materialisty”*) such as Voltaire, Hippocrates and Democritus, do not reveal the secret of their longevity and “as ill luck would have it, they took it to the grave” (*“kak na grekh, unosili v mogilu”*).¹⁸ The theme of lost youth is thus an enquiry into how one maintains one’s creativity and place in the external world over the duration of a lifetime, how one remains embedded in a social reality that constantly eschews the stasis of writing, thought and belief. This is a question at once practical and literary, but it is also a particularly melancholic dilemma.

While the author-figure’s direct, factual approach in the “scientific discussion” has been perfectly adequate to framing the question, it becomes woefully inadequate when it begins to try and answer it; its pretensions to scientific clarity

¹⁷ «Они бросали свою славную работу, они целые дни валялись на оттоманках в рваных войлочных туфлях, курили трубки, грустили, бранились с женами, плакали и ныли, писали, скуки ради и чтоб забыться, свои мемуары о своей прекрасной героической молодости или сочиняли богословские и религиозные трактаты, поскольку для этой мелкой цели не требуется вдохновения и полного бурного творческого здоровья, подъема и того физического благополучия, которое было в молодости.» 3:11-12.

¹⁸ 3:12 and 13.

notwithstanding, the introductory scientific discussion artfully fails in its attempt to pin down direct and factual answers to the questions it poses. The chatty style and innocently ironic tone of the author-figure only make this scientific attempt seem to fail more desperately; he stumbles from hypothesis to contradiction, never succeeding in finding any firm ground on which to base his reasoning. Sometimes his assertions are self-contradictory: for instance, at one point he relates advice he has heard proposing a yoghurt based diet as a key to well-being and longevity, but then straight away remembers a teacher in his youth whose death was widely attributed to his adopting precisely this kind of diet.¹⁹ At other times, his assertions seem to unravel all by themselves. Suggesting that physical weakness and age-related depression has become worse in the last few centuries, the author-figure points to rude health in ages past; he asserts that one frequently reads of some hero who “‘felt thirsty, refreshed himself by knocking back two bottles of rosy Anjou wine, and, mounting his horse, galloped after his affronter...’”.²⁰ The author-figure opines that such feats of intoxicated horsemanship would be utterly beyond the capacities of the average Soviet citizen of 1933 and breezily adduces this as proof of falling standards of health since the seventeenth-century. The rosy Anjou wine immediately links this reference with Alexandre Dumas’ famous novel *The Three Musketeers* (*Les Trois Mousquetaires*, 1844); this historical novel with its faint undertone of nostalgia for a mythical heroic age really says more about France in the twilight of the Bourbon restoration than it does about the age of Richelieu, and consequently the author-figure’s historical point is based on a self-defeating anachronism.²¹

¹⁹ 3:14.

²⁰ «“Он почувствовал жажду, освежился, выкушав две бутылки розового анжуйского вина, и, вскочив на лошадь, понесся галопом за своим оскорбителем...”» 3:15 (ellipsis in the original).

²¹ The reference to Dumas’ novel is obvious, but it can be further strengthened by the fact that in 1931 Zoshchenko had worked on the libretto for an adaptation of *The Three Musketeers* for the Leningrad Theatre of Musical Comedy. See Iu Tomashevskii, ‘Khronologicheskaiia kanva’, p. 351.

This lack of factual and discursive traction makes the end of the scientific discussion quite hard to read; the eleventh chapter brings the reader's growing frustration to the surface and voices it in its title "Fruitless Attempts" ("Besplodnye popytki").²² This builds by chapter seventeen to the frank admission that by the end of the "scientific discussion":

Everything that the author has seen, and everything he has just related – all these separate little scenes and episodes, all these trifles, more worthy of a doctor than a writer, do not adequately explain what we wanted.²³

What this admission actually heralds is the exhaustion of the possibilities of direct, factual discussion of the book's theme, and hence exhaustion of the language of science (a language "more worthy of a doctor"), if not of the scientific method itself.

The author has been examining these trifles, hoping to make something out of all of this, to establish something, to define, to deduce one sort of law of behaviour, one rule in accordance with which one should live one's life.

But practically nothing came from this. Everything crumbled in the author's hands. Every circumstance was correct and justified in itself, but taken together nothing came of it, and the secret of unfading youth and freshness was lost in unknowability.²⁴

It is crucial to note how this initial direct approach to the question of lost youth and melancholia proves inadequate to the thematic ambitions of *Youth Restored*; without this realisation the book's unusual form becomes at once gratuitous and ultimately baffling. The contemporary party-aligned critic Anatolii Gorelev made precisely this

²² 3:16.

²³ «Все, что видел автор, и все, что он рассказал сейчас – все эти отдельные сценки и эпизоды, все эти медочки, достойные скорее врача, чем писателя, не объясняют в достаточной мере того, чего нам хотелось.» 3:24.

²⁴ «Автор присматривается к этим мелочам, надеясь из всего этого чего-то сделать, чего-то установить, определить, вывести один какой-то закон поведения, одно правило, по которому следует вести свою жизнь. / Но практически из этого ничего не выходило. Все рассыпалось в руках автора. Каждое обстоятельство было правильно и справедливо само по себе, но вместе ничего не выходило, и секрет неувядаемой молодости и свежести терялся в неизвестности.» 3:24-25.

error when he suggested that “the trouble with Zoshchenko’s tale is that it is easy to express its [artistic] focus” and that consequently it does not require an artistic form of expression.²⁵ Thus, he all too easily condemns the work to failure, entirely missing the “focus” (a word that in Russian also has the meaning of ‘trick’), which he so breezily dismisses as obvious. As will be seen below, this “focus” or “trick” is far more complicated than Gorelev supposed, and, more importantly, it is utterly impossible to render in the direct, factual and universalizing terms of scientific and medical discourse.

In fact early in the introduction the author-figure had warned of precisely this phenomenon and its attendant toll on the energies of the reader; when outlining the form of the work, he described the place of the scientific discussion vis-à-vis the fictional segments and hinted at the exhaustion the reader would feel as he reached the end of the former:

And only then will the reader, slightly weary and crushed by the ideas of others, receive a portion of entertaining reading which will also appear as a kind of graphic illustration of the aforementioned ideas and discussions.”²⁶

There is an echo of the melancholic “pallor of words” in the failing discursive mode of the introductory scientific discussion: both that “crushed by the ideas of others” and the notion of a truth sensed personally but eluding the grasp of discourse give voice to the melancholic condition in quite forthright terms. Importantly, this authorial advance warning also points to the way beyond this melancholic impasse: literature. With the exhaustion of direct discussion, the argument of *Youth Restored* beyond the introductory section is carried forward in the form of fictional exercises

²⁵ «Беда повести Зошенко в том, что ее фокус легко выразить»; A E Gorelev, *Ispytanie vremenem* (Leningrad: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1935), p.91.

²⁶ «И уже только потом читатель, слегка утомленный и пришибленный чужими мыслями, получит порцию занимательного чтения, которое и явится вроде как бы наглядной иллюстрацией к вышеизложенным мыслям и рассуждениям.» 3:8.

which are supposed to serve as “graphic illustrations” of the themes broached in the scientific discussion. However, rather than being merely illustrative, this fictional turn actually carries the book’s argument beyond the limits of scientific discourse towards a more literary truth; eschewing the universality of scientific fact, it pursues a truth grounded in the particulars of a single life observed.

This fictional turn actually began at chapter twelve, the last five chapters of the introductory section being short fictional episodes of comparable length to the classic Zoshchenko *feuilleton* of the twenties. However, by chapter seventeen, this semi-fictional discussion develops into a longish tale which comes to dominate *Youth Restored* and which, in terms of length and style, is broadly comparable to *Michel Siniagin* or any of the longer tales collected in *Sentimental Tales*. It tells of a man, “who to a certain extent, discovered the secret of his youth.”²⁷ This man, professor Volosatov, the hero of the tale, is a fifty-three year old astronomer living in Detskoe Selo. He is introduced by the author-figure as a chance acquaintance met in the course of a short stay in the same building; this was a convalescent sojourn untaken because the author was “tired-out by insomnia, everyday work and various personal matters”.²⁸ The cause of the insomnia and the “various personal matters” are not defined, but it is significant that the author-figure and Volosatov are initially drawn together through the melancholic soundscapes drifting up to the author’s room from the professor’s piano: “this man, as if on purpose, chose the saddest, the most doleful melodies”.²⁹

And the author, lying on his bed, could not help but listen to these doleful sounds and saw in them a sad old age, fading, the wish for death and that extraordinary reconciliation with fate from which the author was running and which he wanted to resist.

²⁷ «[...] который до некоторой степени открыл секрет своей молодости.» 3:25.

²⁸ «Утомленный бессонницей, ежедневной работой и разными личными делами»; 3:26.

²⁹ «Этот человек, как нарочно, выбрал самые грустные, самые печальные мелодии»; 3:26.

And listening to these melodies, the author, probably for the hundredth time, thought about the sad days of fading and old age, and about death, which, perhaps, already stood behind this man playing the piano.³⁰

The author-figure, initially drawn to the melancholy contemplation of death he hears in the professor's music, eventually finds himself progressively reading his own melancholy obsessions into Volosatov through his music. Indeed he and the ageing professor find their deepest kinship in the wordless melancholy of age and the shadow of approaching death.

Volosatov is in fact a relatively straightforward fictionalization of those sad figures, described during the scientific discussion, whose creative energies are spent by middle age. Volosatov is "old, sick and weary." Moreover: "His face had hardened into a grimace of discontentment. His eyes had become empty and indifferent."³¹ In many ways, he recalls the melancholic disillusionment of Chekhov's ageing professor in 'A Dreary Story' ('Skuchnaia istoriia', 1889): like Chekhov's hero he feels alienated from his professional academic persona; moreover, in common with Chekhov's professor, he feels just as much a stranger to his own youthful sense of selfhood; he is similarly struck by the starkness of his wife's ageing and, like Chekhov's depressive, is becoming increasingly estranged from his family, particularly his daughter. However, Zoshchenko's hero experiences an additional source of alienation over his Chekhovian forebear; Volosatov finds himself, in spite of his revolutionary sympathies, inhibited from full participation in Soviet construction because of ill-defined personal doubts about living without the protection

³⁰ «И автор, лежа на своей кровати, невольно прислушивался к этим печальным звукам и видел в них грустную старость, увядание, желание умереть и то необычайное примерение с судьбой, от которого автор бежал и чему автор хотел сопротивляться. / И, слушая эти мелодии, автор, вероятно, в сотный раз думал о печальных днях старости и увядания и о смерти, которая, может, уже стоит за плечами этого игравшего на рояле человека.» 3:26.

³¹ «Итак, он был старый, больной и утомленный. Grimаса неудовольствия как бы застыла на его лице. Глаза стали пустые и равнодушные.» 3:32.

afforded by property ownership. There are also important differences between Chekhov's story and Zoshchenko's. For a start, Chekhov's is subtitled 'from the Memoirs of an Old Man' ('iz zapisok starogo cheloveka') and is presented entirely from the point of view of the hero; Zoshchenko's is refracted through the continuing narration of the author-figure from the introductory section. However, the most important difference between the two characters is that where Chekhov's hero submissively awaits death, Volosatov resolves to struggle actively against his impending senescence.

Chekhov's hero actively shunned medical advice from the outset; but Volosatov begins by earnestly seeking the help of doctors and medical professionals. He undertakes an arduous six-month course of medical treatment which not only fails, but adds a hypochondriacal aspect to his condition: "In short, half a year later he was a tormented neurasthenic frightened by all the symptoms of his illness and afraid of everything."³² One day, however, while getting ready to visit a famous neuropathologist, Volosatov's sudden burst of activity makes him feel much better: although the improvement does not last, "it was enough in order to think a little and to examine his illness carefully."³³ From this point on Volosatov takes charge of his health personally. He scours books on medical and psychological subjects, he institutes a regimen of exercise and calisthenics; however, confronted by his body's stubborn decrepitude, he realizes that its condition "was created thanks to his life, thanks to his deeds and behaviour".³⁴ Thus, he turns his focus onto changing precisely this: "He decided to change his life, his daily routine and all his habits."³⁵ In a foreshadowing of the later anamnestic method of the author-figure in *Before Sunrise*,

³² «Короче говоря, через полгода он был задерганный неврастеник, напуганный всеми признаками своей болезни и пугающийся всего.» 3:52.

³³ «Но этого было достаточно, чтоб подумать и внимательно присмотреться к болезни.» 3:52.

³⁴ «[...] создалось благодаря его жизни, благодаря его поступкам и поведению»; 3:53.

³⁵ «Он решил изменить свою жизнь, свой порядок дня и все свои привычки.» 3:54.

Volosatov also begins a systematic process of recollection of the years of his youth “in order to compare and to catch sight of those errors he’d committed and which had led him towards old age and decrepitude.”³⁶

This is the struggle to restore lost youth that defines the tale; importantly, it turns Volosatov into a markedly different man. The change in him is made evident by being projected against the background of the professor’s neighbours. On the one hand there is the neurasthenic Karetnikov, a hypochondriacal accountant who had lost faith in his profession and lost the faithfulness of his wife. The lover of Karetnikov’s wife, a certain Kashkin, forms the other extreme of this background. He is a scheming and lascivious vulgarian who combines his intellectual and cultural limitations with rude health and a callous indifference to anything beyond himself in the here and now. Thus, Volosatov’s struggle takes place between the extremes of melancholic self-abnegation and philistine self-assertion represented by Karetnikov and Kashkin respectively. When the story opens, the ageing and ailing professor seems to have more in common with the melancholic pole of this continuum; however, as he begins to restore his lost youth Volosatov is drawn increasingly towards the uncouth philistinism of Kashkin:

Since the years of his youth he [Volosatov] had been accustomed to despising glossy, healthy, red-cheeked, broad-chested fellows, calling them animals and brutes. Now, in his imagination, he pictured himself in precisely this way. He liked this image and aspired to it.³⁷

This change in outlook translates into the professor’s greater interest in, and closer friendship with Kashkin, whose rugged health and militant self-interest fascinate the

³⁶ «[...] чтобы сравнить и увидеть те ошибки, которые он допустил и которые привели его к старости и одряхлению»; 3:54.

³⁷ «Он с молодых лет привык презирать лошенок, здоровых, краснощеких, грудастых людей, называя их животными и скотами. Нынче в своем воображении он рисовал себя именно таким. Он полюбил этот образ и стремился к нему.» 3:56.

exhausted intellectual: "He was attracted by this healthy, thick-set type, who didn't know anything of melancholia, fatigue of the senses and other intelligentsia feelings."³⁸ However, as much as he hoped to learn lessons in life from Kashkin, and as much as Kashkin enjoyed dispensing pearls of existential wisdom, Volosatov ultimately realizes that it is ignorance which saves Kashkin from the melancholic torments of old age: Volosatov hoped to find in Kashkin a living exemplar, "But he saw stupidity and complete and utter vulgarity which protected this man from the vicissitudes of life."³⁹

One thing he does pick up from Kashkin though, is the suggestion that his struggle to restore his lost youth demands him leaving his wife in favour of a younger woman. The younger woman Kashkin has in mind is Tulia, the vapid, lazy, luxury-loving daughter of Karetnikov. Kashkin is hardly being selfless in suggesting this match: he envisages further ingratiating himself into the Karetnikov household as a result of it; he also hopes to be in a position to benefit materially from the professor's gratitude for finding love and youth; but, most important of all, he cannot wait to exact revenge on Volosatov's wife whom he loathes. Unaware of Kashkin's personal machinations, Volosatov agrees and eventually becomes infatuated with Tulia. Under her influence he updates his wardrobe, shaves and dyes his moustache and the years just seem to fly off him. Eventually he leaves his stunned wife and moves in with the Karetnikovs. Curiously, his infatuation with Tulia seems to grow in direct proportion to her capriciousness and yearning for leisure, luxury and indulgence. As a result of Tulia's pestering, Volosatov even organizes and accompanies his vulgar, young lover on a trip to Yalta. At first all seems to go well, but Tulia's eye soon begins to stray:

³⁸ «Его привлекал этот здоровый, плотный субъект, который не знал, что такое меланхолия, утомление чувств и прочие интеллигентские ощущения.» 3:58.

³⁹ «Но он увидел глупость и непроходимую пошлость, которые защищали этого человека от превратностей жизни.» 3:58.

when the professor finds her in the arms of a younger man in their Yalta hotel he has a stroke and collapses. Arriving back in Leningrad for hospital treatment, he eventually returns to his wife, but not to his old life. He keeps up his age-defying regimen, gradually overcomes his doubts about the Soviet system and even begins to get on better with his daughter. In fact, his wife begins her own programme of regaining her lost youth; both become happier and more politically active together. However, Volosatov still cannot resist the occasional longing glance in the direction of Tulia's house.

The fictional account of Volosatov's attempt to restore his lost youth offers a genuine discursive advance over the failed mock-scientific discussion that opened *Youth Restored* in terms of addressing the central concerns of the work. Key to this advance is the way in which the story switches the focus from a search for universal, ideal truth to a quest for a subjective perspective on senescence and mental health. The importance of this change in perspective is articulated fictionally: the professor's quest for health and renewed creativity fails in the context of institutional medicine and only achieves any success when supplemented by a personal, existential project. This is not just a satirical gesture at the limits of medical knowledge, but rather a broader (almost Dostoevskian) suggestion that the influence of abstract ideas is felt only on an abstract plane; they have to be lived, learnt and internalized at the level of the individual consciousness for them to become compelling in concrete and subjective terms. For instance, early on in his regimen of self-improvement when Volosatov despairs at his lack of progress, his daughter Lida vainly pleads with him out of pity just to embrace Soviet reality and find his cure that way:

‘Vasilek,’ she’d say, ‘what’s the idea of curing yourself like that? There is a simpler and easier way – come face to face with life. Take

up social tasks; feel yourself part of a common family. You'll come to this anyway.'

But, sadly shaking his head, he would say that this is not for him. he would never feel sincere in himself. He would try to struggle on by himself.⁴⁰

In terms of the story, Lida is absolutely correct: Volosatov will reach that point eventually. However, this fact in itself is inadequate for self-reinvention; what is required is personal, "sincere", flesh and blood conviction. It is this attempt to convince the self in almost biological terms that motivates Volosatov's programme of mental and bodily self-rejuvenation.

This point is perhaps most eloquently made through Volosatov's being a professional astronomer. The choice of the hero's profession is hardly coincidental in this respect; astronomy is surely one of the most abstract and theoretical scientific disciplines; in an era before space exploration its interests would have seemed even further from the realities of lived experience than they do today. In view of this, it is strange that, as Vol'pe has noted, the tale is full to bursting with references to astronomy, even though "in essence, the professor's private way of life had nothing in common with his scientific life."⁴¹ However, these references are important, not for reasons to do with astronomy *per se*, but because the detached and theoretical language of this abstract science provides a foil for the articulation of concerns much closer to Volosatov's heart. Early in the tale Volosatov is described by the author-figure thus: "This professor and stargazer was a dreamer and fantasist who disliked

⁴⁰ «Василек, - говорила она, - что за мысль так лечить себя? Есть способ более простой и легкий – подойти вплотную к жизни. Займись общественной работой, почувствуй себя частью общей семьи. Ты все равно придешь к этому. / Но он, печально покачивая головой, говорил, что это не для него, он никогда не почувствует себя искренним. Он попробует бороться один.» 3:53-54.

⁴¹ «По существу, личный быт профессора ничего общего с его научной жизнью не имел.» Ts Vol'pe, *Iskusstvo nepokhozhesti*, pp. 239-240.

the rude embraces of life and its vulgar reality.”⁴² There is a subtle play on words here: *zvezdochet* is an archaic word for astrologer, but its proximity to the words “dreamer and fantasist” give it the gently mocking sense of otherworldliness suggested by “stargazer”. This intimation of astrology brings to the surface the astrological meanings of the planets discussed in the astronomical references that Vol’pe has noted. The effect is, to some extent, similar to that in Gustav Holst’s famous orchestral suite *The Planets* (written between 1914 and 1916), where astronomy and astrology lie teasingly side by side.

To be sure, *Youth Restored* is not a work of the occult. Whereas Holst’s invocation of astrology represented a genuine personal fascination, this is not really the case in *Youth Restored*. Rather, the occult in Zoshchenko’s book exists only in a purely etymological sense: it represents a hidden referential system, a kind of pre-scientific textual memory, which disrupts the clean, totalizing surface of a scientific discourse to make room for the articulation of a language of selfhood within the scientific word. Particularly interesting in this regard is the number of times that the planet Saturn is mentioned in the tale. Volosatov’s wife twice mentions the ringed planet as a means of instigating conversation with her taciturn husband.⁴³ At one point in the story, knowledge of the weight of Saturn is cited rhetorically as one of Volosatov’s intellectual accomplishments in order to stress the contrast between his old and rejuvenated selves.⁴⁴ When Kashkin asks the professor about the planet Jupiter, Volosatov begins a long discussion about astronomy with his comically bemused interlocutor, in the course of which he emphasizes, among other things, the

⁴² «Этот профессор и звездочет был мечтатель и фантазер, не любящий грубых объятий жизни и ее пошлой действительности.» 3:33.

⁴³ 3:35 and 44.

⁴⁴ 3:62.

fact that the years on Saturn are longer than those on Jupiter.⁴⁵ In astrological terms Saturn is the bringer of old age and Jupiter is the bringer of joy; moreover, as discussed in chapter one, Saturn has also long been associated with the melancholic temperament. Thus, there is a shadow reference here to Volosatov's personal concerns with aging and melancholia, expressed through a detached scientific language whose putative focus is definitively elsewhere.

Beyond these shadow astrological references, there is also a pronounced sense in which the professor reads his own melancholia in the vastness of the firmament that he studies. For instance, when asked by Kashkin whether there are people on the moon, "the professor, grinning bitterly, described a dead planet deprived of air and all life."⁴⁶ This bitter excitement about the lifelessness of the moon betrays more than just a professional interest in the nature of the lunar atmosphere; it speaks of the melancholy lifelessness that resides in the professor's own psychic inner space. Similarly, when Volosatov talks to his daughter "about the eternal cold of the universe, about the death of the earth and about such immeasurable spaces as are beyond the comprehension of man", he is surely voicing the distant contours of his own melancholia as much as he is trading conversational facts about the nature of the cosmos.⁴⁷ Whether he realizes it or not, in these instances the professor is really finding a voice for the inner self within the contours of a public and scientific discourse. If the nature of his inner self reveals itself, more or less involuntarily, through the cracks of such public discourse, then it perhaps stands to reason that in order to influence that selfhood one has to hijack a suitable mode of public discourse for similarly personal ends. This is perhaps the most important insight that the tale

⁴⁵ 3:44-45.

⁴⁶ «Профессор, горько усмехаясь, описывал мертвую планету, лишенную воздуха и всякой жизни.» 3:44.

⁴⁷ «[...] о вечном холоде вселенной, о гибели Земли и о таких неизмеримых пространствах, какие недоступны пониманию человека.» 3:46.

reveals; it is an insight that is developed much further in the commentary which follows the tale, ultimately becoming a central part of the overall argument of *Youth Restored*.

The commentary ostensibly represents a return to the more direct, factual mode of discussing old-age and melancholia that the reader encountered in the introductory section; the key difference, however, is that in the commentary the argument seems able to find enough discursive traction to avoid the frustrating instability of meaning that characterised the earlier “scientific discussion”. Importantly, this is not because the facts it adduces are any more stable or convincing in themselves; there are actually countless instances of factual inaccuracy, misleading citation or tenuous opinion masquerading as objective knowledge. For instance, the author-figure’s assertion that “accidental death does not exist as it were” immediately strikes the reader as being an over-generalization, as excessive as it is counterintuitive.⁴⁸ This impression only worsens when the author extends this contentious idea to claim that Pushkin’s and Lermontov’s deaths in duels were really more akin to suicides, being the result of both poets’ subconscious yearning for death.⁴⁹ However, whatever reservations the reader maintains about these assertions in terms of literary biography, the underlying argument that the author-figure advances nonetheless seems to stick. The reason for this is that the commentary is based on, and directly tied back to, the preceding story. Thus, when the author-figure, describing Pushkin’s demise, suggests that “the mood sought an object”, the reader, regardless of whether or not he accepts the author’s thoughts on the poet’s death, still accepts the underlying point because of its resonance with the story of Volosatov.⁵⁰ The professor’s own peculiarly melancholic astronomy, for instance, seems to be just such

⁴⁸ «Автор хочет этим сказать, что случайной смерти как бы не существует.» 3:81.

⁴⁹ 3:81-82.

⁵⁰ «Настроение искало объект.» 3:81.

an example of a “mood” seeking “an object”, in this case one within an unconnected discursive context. That this is what the reader needs to take from the discussion of premature poetic demise in the commentary is surely confirmed by the fact that the phrase about moods seeking objects is repeated verbatim just a few pages later in the context of a similarly idiosyncratic discussion of the death of Mayakovsky.⁵¹

This unusually circuitous mode of argument is not adopted for the sake of perversity; it serves two important functions in terms of the discursive logic of the book. The first function is philosophical: having problematized the universalizing ambitions of scientific discourse in the opening section of *Youth Restored*, the work could hardly then adopt precisely this direct, scientific approach without the larger argument becoming self-defeating. By refracting the discussion of old-age and melancholia through idiosyncratic readings of the lives of others and a focussed re-reading of the fictional element of the book itself, the argument can be developed without ever losing its basis in the particular. Thus it manages to communicate an important subjective reflection on senescence and mental well-being without that reflection being able to crystallize into the smooth, discursive surface of universal scientific truth, something that would be at variance with the whole *raison d'être* of *Youth Restored*. The second function of this circuitous mode of argument is illustrative: it elaborates a process of constructing a personal, subject-centred understanding of self and psyche in the context of publicly available discursive modes, demonstrating the resources used, the methods employed and the potential problems encountered. It is interesting in view of the observations made in the previous chapter that this subject-centred discourse of self and psyche emerges

⁵¹ 3:86.

through similar acts of authorial reading to those analyzed in chapter five, which were discussed in terms of reading the written and relational selves.

The authorial reading of the written self is enacted by the very structure of *Youth Restored*: in the particular interaction of the commentary and the novella. Vol'pe has suggested that the commentary "turns the tale into a parable" ("prevrashchaet povest' v pritchu"), but has noted that this does not affect the ability of the tale to stand on its own:

[T]his tale could also exist not just as a parable. If it was to be freed from its connection with the commentaries, it would straight away lose its didactic character and acquire independence, having been turned into a free-standing, satirical tale.⁵²

One might question whether didactic is quite the right term for a work which so punctiliously eschews the complacent language of universal truth and idealized meaning: if it is a parable, then it is of an extremely heuristic variety. Nonetheless, Vol'pe's comments on the independence of the fictional element in the work offer a very significant contribution to understanding the structure of *Youth Restored*. Linda Scatton develops this insight further, adding that: "the commentaries, unlike the Volosatov story, may be read subsequently to, but never totally independently of the fictional segment."⁵³ Thus, the order of the work is fixed, with the commentary structured in such a way as to encourage the re-reading of the tale. The commentary is all but impossible to read without reference to the relevant parts of the novella, the requisite re-reading being guided and facilitated by a system of endnotes. In fact, the reader is explicitly advised to read the novella without consulting the commentary and then to refer back to the relevant part of the story when reaching the commentary

⁵² «[Э]та повесть могла бы существовать и не как притча. Если ее освободить от связи с комментариями, она сразу утратит свой дидактический характер и приобретет самостоятельность, превратившись в самостоятельную сатирическую повесть.» Ts Vol'pe, *Iskusstvo nepokhozhesti*, pp. 237-238.

⁵³ L. Scatton, *Evolution of a Writer*, p. 178.

itself.⁵⁴ Crucially however, this re-reading that the structure of *Youth Restored* obliges the reader to undertake shadows that earlier re-reading of the novella *by the author-figure* which underlies the act of writing the commentary.

Thus, just as in all Zoshchenko's longer works written in the wake of *Sentimental Tales*, in the commentary to *Youth Restored* the author as reader is once more given centre stage. In fact, the importance of the author-figure in *Youth Restored* can hardly be overstated. Vol'pe notes this prominence, suggesting that "the theme of 'youth restored' is not only the theme of the tale, it is also the personal theme of the 'author'".⁵⁵ More than this, however, the author-figure is the most important source of coherence in what is, even by Zoshchenko standards, an exceptionally disjunctive work. He greets the reader from the first page and it is his stumbling attempts at a scientific discussion of his theme that the reader enjoys and endures in equal measure throughout the opening section; the same author-figure also posits himself as narrator of the Volosatov tale and, following his melancholic ponderings on the professor's wistful piano playing, he leaves deliberately vague the extent to which Volosatov might be based on observation or might actually be his own fictional self-portrait. This same authorial voice then leads the reader back to his own novella in the commentary section. While its discursive approach, style and content vary from section to section, the voice always remains directly attributable to the figure of the author; indeed, aside from reported speech and formal quotation it is only the voice of the author-figure that the reader hears throughout. Thus, when he re-reads his own novella in the commentary section, he performs a comparable act of authorial re-

⁵⁴ 3:11 (footnote 2). This footnote was only included when *Youth Restored* was published in book form and was absent from the version serialized in *Zvezda* (Nos. 6, 8 and 10 of 1933). While the advice in the footnote makes the re-reading enshrined in the commentary explicit, it is worth noting that it would have been impossible to read the commentary alongside the novella in the serialized version as the order in which the reader encountered these two parts was determined by the fact of serialization.

⁵⁵ «Тема 'возвращенной молодости' – не только тема повести, она также и личная тема 'автора'.» Ts Vol'pe, *Iskusstvo nepokhozhesti*, p. 227.

reading to that already described in *Sentimental Tales*: an authorial reading of his own written self.

This is not the only way in which the author-figure presents himself as reader in *Youth Restored*: the author-figure also reads himself relationally in a way comparable to that already seen in *Letters to the Writer*, only this time incorporating a much wider range of textual resources. The argument in the commentary unfolds, to a significant extent, through readings of other texts: there are numerous, if idiosyncratic, engagements with the biographies of writers, artists and philosophers; there are extracts from readers' letters; there is even an extended reading of Sir James Jeans' work of astronomical popularization *The Universe Around Us* (1929). These readings are all of a highly personal nature and often reach very unusual conclusions: what Lesley Milne has said about the discussion of Mayakovsky's suicide in the commentary section of the book can really be said about all the authorial readings in *Youth Restored*: they tell us much more about the author-figure than they do about their ostensible subject.⁵⁶ The author-figure's unusual readings of Pushkin's and Lermontov's deaths have already been commented on as instances where the biographical subject matter serves as a means of authorial self-articulation. This is even more the case with his reading of the life and death of Gogol, whose mental suffering and early demise the author-figure imputes entirely to the great writer's inability to manage his body, mind and the tempo of artistic creation.⁵⁷ Contrary to usual critical and biographical opinion, the author-figure further implicates Gogol's failure to manage psychic, metabolic and creative rhythms in the writer's inability to complete the second part of *Dead Souls*: it is pointedly neither the failure to find a language appropriate to the ambitions of his magnum opus, nor any sense of social or

⁵⁶ L. Milne, *Zoshchenko and the Ilf-Petrov Partnership*, p. 68.

⁵⁷ 3:88-90.

political conflict that is responsible for his mental sufferings: rather it is very much the other way round.⁵⁸

As with all of the readings of others incorporated in *Youth Restored*, this one says more about the author-figure than it does about Gogol, something confirmed by a slight sense of reticence before a personal hero. He suggests that:

Out of a sense of respect for this writer the author does not have the resolve to definitively assert his thoughts. Perhaps the author has also himself missed something here. But all the same, it seems to us that Gogol committed the grossest error, which led him to a malady of the soul and towards an early death.⁵⁹

This instance of authorial equivocation hints at the interpretative liberties that the author-figure is taking with Gogol. Importantly, this is the only point at which the author-figure expresses any kind of doubt about his biographical readings: this is in spite of the fact that his reading of Gogol's life and death is a long way from being the most egregiously misrepresentative example in *Youth Restored*. This is no doubt explained by Zoshchenko's particular and enduring enthusiasm for Gogol, something that has already been suggested elsewhere in this study; however, the admission does reveal the extent to which the readings of the texts of others in *Youth Restored* are often wilfully personalized by the author-figure, perhaps even up to the point of misreading.

What the author-figure is doing here and elsewhere in the commentary is reading his own understanding of mental well-being and psychic hygiene between the lines of other textual resources, particularly the lives of writers. There is perhaps a slight element of parody in this attempt: Irina Sirotkina has described the special

⁵⁸ 3:96.

⁵⁹ «Из чувства почтения к этому писателю автор не решается окончательно утверждать свои мысли. Быть может, автор и сам тут в чем-нибудь не разобрался. Но все же нам кажется, что Гоголь совершил грубейшую ошибку, приведшую его к душевной болезни и к ранней смерти.» 3:88.

importance of literary pathography, (the psychiatric study of writers through their lives and works) in the context of Russian psychiatry of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth- centuries, arguing that it was a key element in national medical debates about the nature and purpose of psychiatry.⁶⁰ The reclamation of this medicalized approach to literature by an ostensibly literary work is thus not without an element of irony. Moreover, it is an irony only increased by the fact that the author-figure in *Youth Restored* uses these parody pathographies in order to articulate his own, non-medical, subject-centred understanding of mental illness. In doing this, at times, the author-figure draws on a comically macaronic medicalese or makes spurious appeals to physiological evidence. In the case of the pathographical reading of Gogol discussed above, the author-figure suggests that Gogol's mental pathologies result from nervous fatigue which manifests itself in endocrinal dysfunction:

Consequently, significant fatigue of the brain and its improper nourishment disturb the functioning of secretion, which, in its turn, not functioning properly, poisons the brain and blood with the chemically incorrect output of its glands.⁶¹

Yet, from between the cracks of this pseudo-medicalese the author-figure articulates his own very personal understanding of the psychodynamics of melancholia. There is a certain appropriateness about this: it will be remembered that Volosatov's melancholia found its voice between the cracks of a scientific discourse; it seems only fitting that the author-figure's language of melancholia speaks through comparable fissures in the language of institutional medicine.

The language of melancholia that the author-figure articulates, its medicalized inflection notwithstanding, is founded simply enough on a conception of mental

⁶⁰ I Sirotkina, *Diagnosing Literary Genius: A Cultural History of Psychiatry in Russia, 1880-1930* (Baltimore MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), pp.5-13 and *passim*.

⁶¹ «Стало быть, значительное утомление мозга и неправильное питание его нарушают работу секретиции, которая, в свою очередь, неправильно работая, отравляет мозг и кровь химически неправильной продукцией своих желез.» 3:89.

illness as psychological habit or inertia. These habits are frequently subconscious and key among them are memories and thoughts which are overindulged to a pathological level, acquiring a kind of psychic inertia which needs to be interrupted to ensure health and well-being. Memory in particular turns out to be an important agent of mental pathology. The author suggests that:

A healthy brain (in the given case, say, the brain of a monkey) has that extremely marked peculiarity of reacting only to what is there at a given moment. This brain as it were does not remember anything except that which is there.⁶²

This ideal of psychic health and balance is tellingly not human, with the clear implication that it is included as an illustrative extreme. The other pole of the extreme which the author-figure cites is the mind of the mentally ill.

But the brain that is sick, abnormal (as an extreme, let us assume the brain of the mentally ill), in contradistinction, has that marked peculiarity of all the time, continuously and without break, remembering something or other. Some kind of idea, notion or mania never leaves the brain.⁶³

These two extreme poles of mental health recall the marginally less excessive continuum that confronted Volosatov in the novella: finding a realistic and meaningful place between the self-reflective excesses of Karetnikov and the philistine immersion in the here and now represented by Kashkin. The point of this extreme comparison is to indicate that perfect mental health is impossible to achieve within the bounds of the human and, moreover, is no more desirable than perfect mental illness. Thus, it subtly posits melancholia and neurasthenia as more extreme manifestations of

⁶² «Здоровый мозг (в данном случае, скажем, мозг обезьяны) имеет ту чрезвычайно резкую особенность, что он реагировать только лишь на то, что есть в данную минуту. Этот мозг как бы не помнит ничего другого, кроме того, что есть.» 3:114.

⁶³ «Мозг же больной, ненормальный (как крайность, допустим, мозг психически больного), напротив того, имеет ту резкую особенность, что он все время, постоянно и без перерыва что-то такое помнит. Какая-то идея, какое-то представление или мания не покидают мозг.» 3:114.

something more or less common to the human condition, and thus, presumably, not subject to the same stigma as might pertain to something categorically different.

In fact, for the author-figure, the struggle for mental health entails the struggle against the formation of pathological habits of thought, memory or psychic affect. He argues that repetitive overstimulation of this kind congeals into a habit which becomes increasingly entrenched in the mind's subconscious. The author suggests that there are two ways in which these pathological mental habits can be disrupted. If not too entrenched, "treatment comes by itself in conditions of more or less prolonged relaxation and change of environment."⁶⁴ The author-figure adds that in such cases "it is not necessary at all, and sometimes even harmful, to analyze and dissect one's illness."⁶⁵ It is only when the pathological habits of thought, feeling and memory are so entrenched as to be unresponsive to a change in surroundings that a more formal intervention is required: "It is impossible to remove these thoughts and feelings by physical means. It is possible to remove them in only one way – evaluate them differently."⁶⁶ Quoting one of Marcus Aurelius' meditations to the effect that changing one's relations to painful objects inures one against their baleful influence, the author-figure suggests that this subjective revaluation of object relations is something that "is created not, perhaps, by autosuggestion, it is created first and foremost by logical reasoning."⁶⁷ Yet this is a process of reasoning within the self based on the acknowledgement of one's own mental illness; moreover, it is utterly dependent on personal conviction and emotional sincerity:

⁶⁴ «[И]злечение приходит само по себе при условии более или менее продолжительного отдыха и перемены обстановки.» 3:122.

⁶⁵ «В этом случае вовсе не требуется, а иногда даже и вредно анализировать и разбирать свою болезнь.» 3:122.

⁶⁶ «Эти мысли и воспоминания физическим путем убрать нельзя. Их можно убрать лишь единственным способом – дать им иную оценку.» 3:122.

⁶⁷ «[...] создается не путем, что ли, самовнушения, это создается прежде всего логическим рассуждением.» 3:122.

And if this is done in a heartfelt way, that is if the person has really thought about this with feeling and not only formally, then deliverance from troubling thoughts comes with extraordinary ease.⁶⁸

What is striking about this subject-centred language of mental illness is how much it has in common with the satirical concerns of the previous decade. Disinterred from its medicalized articulation, this amounts to the selfsame urge to mental plasticity and subjective adaptation that sounds again and again throughout Zoshchenko's comic fiction. Yet there is a crucial difference: *Youth Restored* begins to ponder how and begins to suggest tools for just such existential self-improvement to Zoshchenko's curious readership.

Life, Literature and Therapy

If the key to mental wellbeing is the disruption of established mental habits and psychically-ingrained expectation, then the highly unusual form of *Youth Restored* delivers precisely that. Both Lesley Milne and Tsesar' Vol'pe have stressed the degree to which *Youth Restored* would have defied contemporary expectations which still regarded the Zoshchenko name as synonymous with comic fiction.⁶⁹ However, even with these expectations tempered today by hindsight, *Youth Restored* must still remain a real shock to the system of most readers. And yet, standing back a little, the disjunctive form of the work gradually begins to acquire a more meaningful shape: when it is remembered that the author-figure named thirty-five as the age at which youthful creativity ends and the extended appendices of old age commence, then the thirty-five chapters of the novella with its appended commentary begin to make some aesthetic sense. *Youth Restored* is actually shaped like the life-cycle it seeks to

⁶⁸ «И если это сделано сердечно, то есть если человек действительно с чувством, а не только формально подумал об этом, - избавление от тревожных мыслей приходит с необычайной простотой.» 3:122.

⁶⁹ See *Iskusstvo nepokhozhesti*, p. 226 and *Zoshchenko and the Ilf-Petrov Partnership*, p. 66.

describe: the novella represents youthful creativity with the tale being the highpoint of its flourishing; the commentary represents the struggle to restore it. In terms of this structure, the fact that the commentary is explicitly retrospective is important, for in its re-reading of the novella it does, according to the aesthetic logic of *Youth Restored*, take both the reader and the author-figure back to the creativity of youth.

Understanding the age-based structure of *Youth Restored* amplifies an especially important aspect of the book: the way in which, by the close of the work, Zoshchenko the writer begins to inscribe himself personally into the voice of the author-figure and thus into the book as a whole. The final section of the commentary, which is linked by endnote to the final sentence of the novella, begins thus: "how often, when closing any kind of book, we think about the author – what he's like, how he lived his life, what he does and what he thinks."⁷⁰ The reader is then presented with a thumbnail autobiography of Mikhail Mikhailovich Zoshchenko narrated in such a way as to associate him with the voice of the author-figure that has been such a constant presence throughout *Youth Restored*. In this autobiographical statement he gives his age as thirty-seven in the first half of 1933, the time when he wrote *Youth Restored*.⁷¹ This places him roughly at that age when the author-figure claimed youth to be spent and old-age beckoning. The reader is also told of Zoshchenko's inclination "to hypochondria and melancholia" ("k ipokhondrii i melankholii") and the fact that:

⁷⁰ «Как часто, закрывая какую-либо книгу, мы думаем об авторе – какой он, как он прожил свою жизнь, что он делает и что думает.» 3:155.

⁷¹ In *Youth Restored*, Zoshchenko claims to have thought about the project for four years but written the work (but for a short authorial addendum) in three months (3:159). Tomashevskii indicates that publication of *Youth Restored* began in the journal *Zvezda* in June 1933 (*Khronologicheskaiia kanva*, p. 352). Assuming Zoshchenko was being genuine about the three-month writing period (and we have no reason to doubt him), then we can place the writing period between April 1933 at the earliest (three months before serialization began) and August 1933, which is the date of the authorial addendum. In fact, the start date of the writing period would probably have been later as in all likelihood the book was not complete when serialization commenced; this fact is strongly suggested by references in the later half of the commentary to letters received from readers commenting on aspects of the half that had already been published (3:153).

“I have heart disease, bad nerves and a degree of impaired psychic function.”⁷² All this makes clear the personal relevance of the thematic concerns of *Youth Restored* in terms of the life of the writer. Vol'pe has detected this sense of the closeness of *Youth Restored* to the real-life concerns of Zoshchenko himself; he suggested that the written style produces a narrative “with unguarded openness” (“*s nezashchishchennoi otkrovennost'iu*”).⁷³ He even suggested that the effect was sufficiently powerful that: “it seems you are reading not a work of *belles-lettres*, but something like *A Writer's Diary*, you are reading a literary *Confession*.”⁷⁴ This sense of the writer's personal concern with ageing is only reinforced by the fact that the last lines of *Youth Restored* are dated 9th August 1933: they were written on the writer's birthday; the one day if any that his thoughts might turn to ageing. The effect of this is to encourage the reader to try and match the outline of Zoshchenko's life given at the end with the pattern of the life-cycle described by the form of *Youth Restored*.

It is extremely important to note, though, that the autobiographical outline given in *Youth Restored* is not a perfect fit with the shape of the work itself; the book has a relevance to the writer's life and concerns and even allows the reader to put that biographical outline into some kind of conceptual shape, but on its own it is not sufficient to make *Youth Restored* into anything like an obvious authorial confession. The effect of this suggestive, but not perfect autobiographical fit, is, perhaps, to encourage the reader, or rather a certain kind of reader, to also try matching their own biographies into the pattern of the life-cycle described by the narrative and form of *Youth Restored* as well as that of Zoshchenko. By loosening the confessional exclusivity of the book, a sort of therapeutic space is opened up whereby the

⁷² «У меня порок сердце, плохие нервы и несколько неправильная работа психики.» 3:158 and 3:156.

⁷³ *Iskusstvo nepokhozhesti*, p.228.

⁷⁴ «Кажется, читаешь не беллетристическое произведение, а дневник писателя, читаешь литературную ‘исповедь’.» Ibid, p.228.

psychodynamic insights that are explicitly advanced in *Youth Restored* become, perhaps, more accessible, relevant and informative for others in a comparable situation.

That said, however, the authorial confession that Vol'pe sensed so acutely is never far away. In this regard, it is interesting to compare the autobiographical outline in *Youth Restored* with what is known of Zoshchenko's actual biography; while it is largely consonant with what is now known of the writer's life, the one glaring inconsistency is that Zoshchenko gives the year of his birth as 1895, that is a year younger than he actually was. The significance of this is that it alters Zoshchenko's actual age at the point he claims to have embarked on *Youth Restored*; in a novel that is all about age this is an extremely noteworthy gesture. He suggests that although written in three months in 1933, *Youth Restored* was conceived four years previously, which would date its conception to 1929.⁷⁵ The birth date of 1895 that is claimed in the book would have made Zoshchenko thirty-four at this point, but according to his actual birth date he would have been thirty-five when he began to think about *Youth Restored*: that is *the exact age* to which he imputes the onset of old-age in *Youth Restored* and *the exact age* that structures the work as a whole. Thus, when the book is reviewed in the light of the author's actual age it becomes a more obviously confessional exercise. Other confessional aspects also then come into clearer focus: most significantly perhaps is the fact that Volosatov's collapse in a Crimean hotel room is related in chapter thirty-two of the novella; in terms of the age-based chapter structure of the novella already noted, it is surely more than coincidental that Zoshchenko's mental collapse in a Crimean hotel room occurred in April 1927 when he was thirty-two years of age. Importantly, all these personal echoes are rendered

⁷⁵ 3:159.

much more muted by the simple device, as arithmetical as it is literary, of adding one year to the birth date he claims for himself. However, restore the correct date and one more immediately feels the confessional depth of Zoshchenko's claim near the end of *Youth Restored* that the book was based on personal experience: "These medical arguments of mine aren't copied out of books. I was the dog on which I performed all the experiments."⁷⁶

The confessional aspect of *Youth Restored* not only tells in the way that it shadows Zoshchenko's biographical life-cycle, it also tells in the way it shadows his literary life-cycle. The pattern of unconvincing, factual discussion yielding first to clearer short fictional treatments of the same theme, before finally growing into a longer sustained artistic engagement is actually quite an accurate depiction of Zoshchenko's own literary development up to the end of the twenties. As Marietta Chudakova has shown, when Zoshchenko first entered the World Literature studio in 1919 it was as a would-be critic with plans for a monograph to be called *At the Breaking-Point (Na perelome)* which would survey Russian literature through key writers of the turbulent decade up to 1919;⁷⁷ the critical project never came off and Zoshchenko found his metier instead as a writer of very short comic fiction before, as has been shown above, creating increasingly longer and more complex literary works by the end of the twenties (in particular *Sentimental Tales*). His literary evolution to 1929 thus broadly traces the formal arc of the first half of *Youth Restored*, which, in accordance with the age-based structure of the work, associates that literary development with a lost youth. This is something adumbrated early in *Youth Restored*, where the author-figure, in emphasizing the novelty of the book, suggests that: "it also bears little similarity to our previous artistic pieces, which were written with a naïve

⁷⁶ «Эти мои медицинские рассуждения не списаны с книг. Я был той собакой, над которой произвел все опыты.» 3:159.

⁷⁷ See M Chudakova, *Poetika Mikhaila Zoshchenko* (Moscow: Nauka, 1979), p.9.

and coarse hand in the rush of our youth and frivolity.”⁷⁸ This in turn means that, in part at least, the restored youth that the book extols presumably entails precisely a return to this earlier writing; indeed this is suggested at the end of *Youth Restored*, where the author-figure, having sketched the outline of his literary career to date, suggests that:

The reader who is distressed at the change in my artistic creation can rest easy. Having published this book, I will again continue what I started. This book is just a short breathing space.⁷⁹

That he is returning to his ‘youthful’ works would thus seem to be part of the ‘youth restored’ that he has in mind. This immediately raises the question of what place ‘senescent’ works like *Youth Restored* occupy in Zoshchenko’s literary oeuvre: if they only succeed in taking him back to where he started then the reader might legitimately object that there is little point in reading them.

Yet in reaching this conclusion one misses an important aspect of the restored youth that the book strives to achieve: in order to be restored it has to be lost first. In this regard it is important to note that youth in itself is not hailed as an unambiguous virtue in *Youth Restored*. As he embarks on his attempt to restore it, Volosatov notices an unpleasant side to the youthful outlook:

And creating new habits for himself, breaking with the previous good-nature of old-age, ridding himself of all worry, agitation, and anxiety, he suddenly began to notice in himself a kind of brutality of youth and even at times, perhaps, a kind of baseness, which he did not want to have at all.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ «Она мало также похожа и на наши прежние художественные вещички, написанные наивной, грубоватой рукой в спехе нашей молодости и легкомыслия.» 3:7.

⁷⁹ «Читатель, который огорчится переменой моего творчества, может быть спокоен. Выпустив эту книгу, я снова буду продолжать то, что начал. Эта книга – просто временная передышка.» 3:159.

⁸⁰ «И, создавая себе новые привычки, расставаясь с прежним добродушием старости, убирая от себя все волнения, беспокойства и тревоги, он вдруг стал замечать в себе какую-то жестокость молодости и даже по временам какую-то, пожалуй, подлость, которую он вовсе не хотел иметь.» 3:54.

This slight sense of reservation about youth in its purest form also finds occasional reflection in some of Zoshchenko's other writings from around this time. There are occasions when youth is used to disparage. In his article 'On Philistinism' ('O meshchanstve', 1930) Zoshchenko published and responded to a critical letter from a young Komsol'ka who bemoaned the philistinism of the correspondents collected in *Letters to the Writer* and complained that the work demonstrated a woeful absence of positive reconstruction in line with ideological ideals. Betraying a degree of tetchiness quite unusual in either his fiction or his critical statements, Zoshchenko finished his riposte on a patronisingly dismissive note in which he derides youthful self-assurance in literature: "But literature should not be spoken of with all the ease and lightness of youth; this can bring all sorts of misfortune."⁸¹ This pejorative invocation of youthful overconfidence in literary matters can also be detected in some of Zoshchenko's barbed rejoinders to hostile, partisan critics: for example, in the preface to *Letters to the Writer* he gently chides "our young, novice critics" ("nashi molodye nachinaiushchie kritiki"), whose misinterpretation of his book as self-promotion Zoshchenko anticipates with an almost paternal forbearance.⁸²

What is derided here is a youthful ignorance of the nature of literature: in both the case of the young Komsol'ka and the hostile critics it is a conception of literature as a mechanical reflection of ideology that is castigated as the arrogance of youth. It will be recalled from *Youth Restored* that the early "scientific discussion" of the theme failed, and the direct, factual approach only achieved any traction when tied back to the fictional, 'literary' part of the book. Thus, the point is that literature must precede ideological reasoning, and not the other way round. Literature can, and

⁸¹ «А говорить о литературе со всей легкостью молодости не стоит. Можно надеть бедо.» М. М. Зощенко, 'O meshchanstve' in Iu. Tomashevskii (ed), *Litso i maska Mikhaila Zoshchenko* (Moscow: Olimp, 1994), p. 97 [pp. 95-97].

⁸² *Pis'ma k pisatel'iu*, p. 327.

should, lead to ideologically viable positions, but it must *precede* them. The mechanistic subordination of literature to ideological imperative is really a youthful simplification comparable to that of Volosatov's daughter, who, as indicated above, urged the ageing professor to restore his youth by simply embracing Soviet ideals because that's where he would end up anyway. *Youth Restored* argues that there is an importance in the process by which youth is restored and ideological positions attained which elevates it beyond youth and ideology in and of themselves. It is a literature which reveals this process, rather than one which fictionally enacts an ideological truth, that has truly restored its youth.

This is a similar point to that discussed in the previous chapter in relation to *The Sky-Blue Book*; however, what is distinctive about its articulation in *Youth Restored* is that it is contextualised within a concrete sense of the importance and role of literature. One thing that is made very clear from the outset is that entertainment should be a fairly minor aspect of the literary enterprise; early in *Youth Restored* the author-figure suggests that those searching for entertainment should skip the "scientific introduction" and the commentary altogether and simply read the tale:

Of course, impatient minds unused to being reined in, but also minds, well, let's say, inflexible, coarse, or, perhaps, base, not possessing special interest in the varied phenomena of nature beyond the distribution of foodstuffs – these minds can, of course, throw out the beginning and the commentaries, so as to get at once to the incidents and events and to at once, so to speak, receive a portion of entertaining reading."⁸³

⁸³ «Конечно, умы нетерпливые, не привыкшие идти на поводу, а также умы, ну, скажем, негибкие, грубоватые или, что ли, низменные, не имеющие особого интереса к различным явлениям природы, кроме выдачи продуктов питания, - эти умы могут, конечно, отбросить начало и комментарии, с тем чтобы сразу приступить к инцидентам и происшествиям и сразу, так сказать, получить порцию занимательного чтения.» 3:8.

This strikingly pejorative passage indicates precisely what proportion of the literary work Zoshchenko believes should be attributable to entertainment: based on the ratio of the parts of the book to the whole, it is a little over a third.

Some indication of the real importance of literature for Zoshchenko perhaps becomes more obvious in the course of his discussion of Tolstoy in the commentary section of *Youth Restored*. The author-figure holds up the great nineteenth-century writer as an exemplary case of someone who managed to prolong their life by their own actions; these actions turn out to be more literary than anything else. The author-figure focuses on Tolstoy's philosophical and religious leanings, arguing that this was primarily an attempt by the writer to organize his own health and prolong his creativity: in other words it was an attempt to restore his own youth. The author-figure argues of Tolstoy's philosophy that "all the philosophical conclusions and rules of behaviour were made as a manual of health".⁸⁴ Indeed: "in the creation of this philosophy was the attempt to organize himself, to protect himself from diseases, which were undermining his will and his body."⁸⁵ While his philosophy may have been disastrous for those who followed it blindly, it was literally a life-saver for Tolstoy: "he returned his lost health, returned his capacity for creativity and almost until the end of his days experienced neither decrepitude nor decline."⁸⁶ Thus, the author-figure imputes a quite vital significance to writing in the case of Tolstoy: in fact, in *Youth Restored* as a whole literature becomes quite literally a matter of life and death.

Literature, of course, is not the only intellectual endeavour with an interest in the life and death of mankind; arguably medicine's intellectual stake in human health

⁸⁴ «Все философские выводы и правила поведения были сделаны как лечебник здоровья». 3:102.

⁸⁵ «И в создании этой философии было стремление организовать себя, защитить себя от болезней, которые расшатывали его волю и тело.» 3:102.

⁸⁶ «Он вернул свое потерянное здоровье, вернул способность к творчеству и почти до конца своих дней не имел ни дряхлости, ни упадка.» 3:102.

and mortality is more vested and, consequently, one of the most interesting aspects of *Youth Restored* is the implicit dialogue it opens with the medical profession. To be sure, the book is not the “awkward medical treatise” (“*nelovkii meditsinskii traktat*”) that Gorelev suggested it had been taken for when it first appeared;⁸⁷ Zoshchenko in fact never tired of repeating that the work was not written with a medical or scientific readership in mind.⁸⁸ Neither did the publication of *Youth Restored* pass unnoticed in traditional literary circles; Vol’pe has suggested that the publishing of the book sparked widespread interest and argument:

The appearance of this work in our literature in 1933 and 1934 was a genuine literary event. Numerous discussions of the book were started which continued for almost two years. Arguments, misunderstandings and complaints to the writer reflected the wide interest of readers in this work.⁸⁹

Nonetheless, the interest of both medical researchers and practitioners was striking, and to some extent came to dominate the pattern of the book’s formal reception, initially at least. Listing the discussions of *Youth Restored* that Zoshchenko participated in, Tomashevskii reveals that a large number of them (the majority of those listed by Tomashevskii) involved medical audiences: on 21st March 1934 a discussion was held at the Leningrad House of Scientists; another was held at the Institute for the Protection of Child and Adolescent Health on 13th April of that year with another the following day at the House of Medical Workers. It was not until 10th May that Tomashevskii notes Zoshchenko’s participation in a more conventional

⁸⁷ A E Gorelev, *Ispytanie vremenem*, p.89.

⁸⁸ For instance, in the course of his participation in a medical discussion of *Youth Restored* at the Institute for the Protection of Child and Adolescent Health in Leningrad, Zoshchenko iterated the fact that the book was not targeted at medical professionals no less than three times. See the excerpts of Zoshchenko’s contribution to this debate published by Iurii Tomashevskii: ‘Vystuplenie M. M. Zoshchenko na dispute’, *Zvezda*, 1994 (8), p. 3, p.5 and p.6.

⁸⁹ «Появление этого произведения в нашей литературе 1933-34 годов было настоящим литературным событием. Начались многочисленные обсуждения этой книги, продолжавшиеся почти два года. Споры, недоразумения, претензии к писателю отражали широкий интерес читателей к этому произведению.» *Iskusstvo nepokhozhosti*, p.226.

literary discussion of the book at the Leningrad section of the Union of Writers.⁹⁰

Thus Anatolii Gorelev was able to observe with a due note of irritation:

And indeed, the tale *Youth Restored* called forth the liveliest discussion ... but it was far from literary. The ambulances of the medics, to a significant degree, came in ahead of literary criticism.⁹¹

The highpoint of the medical reception of *Youth Restored* was undoubtedly marked by two events: first was Zoshchenko's invitation, "immediately after the appearance of the tale" ("*srazu zhe posle vykhoda povesti*"), to participate in the Wednesday seminars of the famous physiologist and Nobel laureate Ivan Pavlov;⁹² second was the publishing of a broadly encouraging article by the famous epidemiologist and architect of the Soviet system of healthcare Nikolai Semashko.⁹³

The extent and calibre of the medical interest in *Youth Restored* would have been a remarkable achievement for a self-styled literary work at any time and in any culture; in many ways, the book's reception in medical circles constitutes a fascinating foray into what today would be called the medical humanities. Perhaps inevitably with this kind of cross-disciplinary dialogue, generally appreciative scientific assessments (such as that of Semashko) were matched by implacably hostile ones. The response by A. Nemilov is a typical example of the latter. He primarily takes issue with Zoshchenko's lack of scholarly rigour, arguing that "the fundamental

⁹⁰ See 'Khronologicheskai kanva', p.352.

⁹¹ «И врьамь, повесть Возвращенная молодость вызвала оживленнейшую дискуссию ... но отнюдь не литературную. Кареты медицинской скорой помощи в значительной степени опередили литературную критику.» A E Gorelev, *Ispytanie vremenem*, p.89.

⁹² In Tomashevskii (ed), 'Vystuplenie M. M. Zoshchenko na dispute', p.3. See also D M Moldavskii, 'Povesti M. Zoshchenko kontsa 20-kh – 30-kh godov', *Russkaia literatura*, (1970) 4, p. 50.

⁹³ The article was entitled "Whether Youth Can Be Restored" – on the Tale *Youth Restored* ('«Можно ли вернуть молодость» - о повести «Возвращенная молодость») and was printed in *Literaturnaia gazeta* (No. 42) on 6th April 1934. Semashko was not only a significant presence in contemporary Soviet medicine; as an Old Bolshevik who had known Lenin in emigration, he was also a prominent figure in both party and state.

trouble with Zoshchenko is that he is methodologically feeble.”⁹⁴ However, he is also particularly troubled by one of Zoshchenko’s recurrent images in *Youth Restored*: “Naively, mechanically, he [Zoshchenko] imagines the human organism as a complex machine which it is necessary to learn how to control”;⁹⁵ with a deft citation from Lenin’s *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, Nemilov simultaneously manages to find a naively mechanistic materialism and a dangerously hidden source of unacknowledged idealism in this same, seemingly innocuous metaphor.⁹⁶

From the outset Zoshchenko anticipated hostility towards *Youth Restored* from the medical establishment and tried to deflect it early on in the book with comically elaborate apologies to, and anxiety “for a group of persons who are, so to speak, connected with medicine” (“*za gruppū lits. tak skazat', prichastnykh k meditsine*”).⁹⁷ Near the beginning of the book, the author-figure begs forgiveness:

[...] for the fact that he, while working away at his business, in passing and, so to speak, like a pig, has wondered into someone else’s vegetable garden, left muddy footprints, perhaps tramped around and, quite possibly gobbled up someone else’s turnip⁹⁸

This might seem a fulsome enough apology, but beneath the light-hearted defensiveness of these protestations there is a certain acerbity coupled to quite a profound point. Equating the disciplinary protectiveness of the medical profession with a private vegetable patch is actually a pretty devastating satirical gesture, the more so in the context of a culture where such private production was officially

⁹⁴ «Основная беда М. Зошкеко в том, что он методически беспомошен.» A Nemilov, 'Mikh. Zoshchenko i problema omolozheniia', p. 96. The same charge is also repeated on the very next page.

⁹⁵ «Наивно, механически, он представляет себе организм человека в виде сложной машины, которой нужно научиться управлять.» 'Mikh. Zoshchenko i problema omolozheniia', p. 96.

⁹⁶ 'Mikh. Zoshchenko i problema omolozheniia', p. 97. This metaphor (which occurs at a number of places in the text, see for instance 3:13, 16 and 17) was evidently something of a sticking point in the scientific reception of *Youth Restored*, for Zoshchenko felt the need to pre-emptively defend it at the discussion of the book at the Institute for the Protection of Child and Adolescent Health discussed above. See Iu Tomashevskii (ed), 'Vystuplenie M. M. Zoshchenko na dispute', p.3.

⁹⁷ 3:6.

⁹⁸ «[...] за то, что он, работая в своем деле, мимоходом и, так сказать, как свинья, забрел в чужой огород, наследил, быть может, натоптал и, чего доброго, сожрал чужую брюкву.» 3:6.

regarded as a lamentably necessary hang-over from the past. The satirical point being made in this double-edged passage becomes much clearer when considered alongside the author-figure's earlier suggestion that any indulgence shown by doctors towards his straying into their disciplinary enclosure would be reciprocated in kind:

The author, in his turn, also promises them to be indulgent if he happens to find himself reading tales, or some kind of stories, say, written by a doctor, or a relative of this doctor, or even by his neighbour.⁹⁹

The comic irony here is that Russian literature is hardly without its writer doctors: one thinks most immediately of Chekhov and Bulgakov of course. Indeed, the Chekhovian intertext of the Volosatov tale only serves to underline this fact; the more so since 'A Dreary Story' itself includes an embedded meditation on the limits of a narrowly scientific medical outlook.¹⁰⁰ The satirical point here is really two-fold. The narrower and more acerbic suggestion is that the disciplinary exclusivity so jealously guarded by the medical profession is not extended by them to other intellectual activities, most notably literature. It is interesting to note in this regard quite how irritated Zoshchenko became when being lectured on writing by members of the medical fraternity; at one of the discussions he even commented with barely concealed anger that: "I have, if you'll allow, been upset today by only one speech. that of professor Ivergetov, who started to give me advice about how I should

⁹⁹ «Автор, в свою очередь, тоже обещает им быть снисходительным, если ему случится читать повести или там, скажем, рассказы, написанные врачом, или родственником этого врача, или даже его соседом.» 3:6.

¹⁰⁰ See in particular the following passage where the disillusioned professor despairs of his own science: "My therapist colleagues, when they teach how to treat, advise 'to individualize each separate case'. It is necessary to heed this advice in order to become convinced that the remedies, which are recommended in textbooks as the very best and most fully suitable for the model case, turn out to be completely unsuitable in separate cases. It is also exactly the same with moral illnesses." («Мои товарищи терапевты, когда учат лечить, советуют 'индивидуализировать каждый отдельный случай'. Нужно послушаться этого совета, чтобы убедиться, что средства, рекомендуемые в учебниках за самые лучшие и вполне пригодные для шаблона, оказываются совершенно негодными в отдельных случаях. То же самое и в нравственных недугах.») A P Chekhov, 'Skuchnaia istoriia: Iz zapisok starogo cheloveka', *Povesti* (Moscow: Khodzhestvennaia literature, 1968), p. 137.

write.”¹⁰¹ Yet beyond the narrow, slightly petulant satire of the one-way professional exclusivity of the medical profession, the author-figure makes a broader and far more profound point: that literature and medicine to a significant extent share a field, a field that is big enough not only to accommodate both scientific and literary perspectives, but also for those perspectives to benefit from a degree of mutual cross-fertilization. The author seems to be suggesting that just as Russian literature would be noticeably poorer without its writer doctors, so perhaps is medicine poorer without the contribution of doctor writers.

This notion of medicine and literature as productively differing perspectives on the same tangled reality does not appear *ex nihilo* in *Youth Restored*: as Linda Scatton shows, the literary engagement with medicine in this later work finds precedents in a range of fictional pieces stretching back into the twenties.¹⁰² Comic stories such as ‘The Operation’ (‘Operatsiia’, 1927), ‘The Patient’ (‘Patsientka’, 1924), ‘On Guard’ (‘Na postu’, 1926) and ‘The Sick’ (‘Bol’nye’, 1928) all involve medical settings or themes. Scatton suggests that in these and other medical stories “the narrator comments chiefly on the patient’s attitude to the doctor, to his own malady and/or to the curative process.”¹⁰³ Zholkovsky also notes this extensive medical theme in both the comic fiction and the later works; however, he adds a dimension of power-play to it, seeing doctors in Zoshchenko’s fiction primarily as representatives of a dispassionate, almost oedipal authority, the clash with which figures so prominently in Zoshchenko’s creative imagination.¹⁰⁴ Yet, in addition to these observations, it might equally be suggested that a common theme in many of these earlier medical

¹⁰¹ «Меня, если позволите, огорчила сегодня только одна речь – профессора Ивергетова, который стал давать мне советы, как мне писать.» ‘Vystuplenie M. M. Zoshchenko na dispute’, p.6.

¹⁰² L. Scatton, *Evolution of a Writer*, pp. 163-166.

¹⁰³ Ibid, p.163.

¹⁰⁴ A. K. Zholovskii, *Poetika nedoveriia*, pp. 73-79.

stories is the way they reconceive clinical settings from a non-medical perspective. Thus, in the story 'The Sick' the focus of attention is switched from the consulting room, which is actually never reached in the course of the story, to the waiting room of an outpatient clinic. Here the waiting patients bicker and boast about the seriousness of their respective illnesses, all the time ironically unaware that many of them are perhaps sitting in the antechamber of death itself. Similarly, in 'The Operation' the minor cosmetic surgery that gives the story its name is completely upstaged by the hero's amorous interest in the young female doctor. This comic transference ends in a typically Zoshchenko act of embarrassing self-exposure when the patient, who had not anticipated having to take his boots off for an eye operation, is forced to reveal both worn-out socks that are "uninteresting, if not to say worse", and, indirectly, his inappropriate feelings towards the pretty young practitioner.¹⁰⁵ In both of these stories the medical perspective is quietly, but definitively, sidelined in order to concentrate on concurrent human stories without an obvious medical relevance.

The clash of medical and non-medical perspectives that is enacted in these stories makes for an extremely fertile source of comic incongruity; but at the same time it also interrogates the edges of what Michel Foucault would later call the medical "gaze": that mode of clinical observation "equipped with a whole logical armature, which exorcised from the outset the naivety of an unprepared empiricism."¹⁰⁶ To some extent at least, Zoshchenko's medical misadventures reintroduce the "naivety" and "unprepared empiricism" of the non-medical gaze to reveal the blind spots and iron-clad inflexibility of its medical counterpart. It is

¹⁰⁵ «Носички-то у меня неинтересные, если не сказать хуже.» 'Operatsiia', 1:398.

¹⁰⁶ M. Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, trans. A M Sheridan (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003 [1963]), p. 131. The clinical gaze is discussed throughout the book, but the nature of its exercise in clinical context is particularly addressed in the chapter entitled 'Seeing and Knowing' (pp. 131-151).

interesting that the sidelined doctor who waits unseen at the margins of the storyline in the 'The Sick' is called Opushkin; his name itself implicitly locates him at the edge (*opushka*) of the dense forest of subjective forces and irrational drives swirling and entangling themselves outside his consulting room. The doctor's marginalising name and narrative liminality combine to suggest the limited penetration of the medical gaze into the real nature of the maladies that confront it.¹⁰⁷ In a similar vein, it is ironic that the eponymous operation in the story of that name involves cutting away tissue obstructing the view out of one of the hero's eyes; the medical gaze under which it is carried out presumably remaining entirely un-operated upon. When the hero jokingly suggests that "medicine is a shady business", he of course primarily voices his ignorance of medicine both at the level of science and social convention: however, without realizing it, he perhaps also suggests precisely these unexamined blind spots that subvert the clinical gaze.¹⁰⁸

Towards the end of 'The Operation', the hero's embarrassment in front of the attractive female doctor leads to her performing the procedure through a fit of hysterical laughter: "she was cutting and guffawing."¹⁰⁹ The combination here of surgical incision and cutting laughter is immediately arresting. Their conjunction in the *person* of the doctor has the effect of making both share equally in the curative function. Importantly though, while complementary, the actions remain separate: a combination of the scientific and the human which the reader feels together constitute a more comprehensive therapy than either in isolation. The medical theme in *Youth Restored* is a development of these early fictional insights into the therapeutic limitations of a purely medicalized approach. However, while this idea is artfully

¹⁰⁷ 'Bol'nye', 1:416.

¹⁰⁸ «Медицина – дело темное.» 1:398.

¹⁰⁹ «Режет и хохочет.» 1:399.

suggested in the early comic fiction, it is only in *Youth Restored* that it is elaborated into any kind of meaningful detail.

The need for a subject- centred, extra-medical perspective on mental health is articulated fictionally in *Youth Restored*. In the tale, one of the reasons for the ineffectiveness of the medical treatment that Volosatov initially seeks is the fact that he is unable to contextualize it in subjective terms: "Nobody told him in simple and understandable words about how his illness could have arisen and how to fight it, apart from pills and preparations."¹¹⁰ The importance of this subjective understanding of his affliction and its treatment is that in its absence well-intentioned, no doubt clinically justified medical interventions can all too easily become assimilated into the texture of the psychopathology itself:

Constant thoughts about his illness, the taking of medicines and treatments cemented in his consciousness the idea that he was seriously ill. The illness, fortified by medicines, had no intention of leaving the patient.¹¹¹

The suggestion here is that medical intervention often has unforeseen, psychological side-effects irrespective of its efficaciousness in the treatment of an objectively defined symptomatology. The deeper implication is that, because these side-effects present subjectively they are largely imperceptible to the clinical gaze; yet, they can be sufficiently counterproductive to completely undermine whatever clinical benefit may accrue from the course of treatment itself.

If this subjective aspect of mental health remains beyond the purview of medical science, then, in some senses, it is equally difficult to grasp on the part of the patient; as Volosatov discovers in the fictional part of *Youth Restored* when he

¹¹⁰ «И никто не ему рассказал простыми и понятными словами о том, как могла возникнуть его болезнь и как с ней бороться, помимо пилюль и микстур.» 3:52.

¹¹¹ «Постоянные мысли о болезни, приемы лекарств и процедур совершенно укрепили в его сознании мысль, что он тяжело болен. Болезнь, подкреплённая микстурами, не имела намерения покидать больного.» 3:52.

embarks on his own attempt to understand the mental dynamics of his illness, it is something for which there is very little guidance:

And reading a pile of books, Vasilek was genuinely distressed and sorry that there was not any kind of manual, any kind of single collection of rules by which one should understand the workings of one's body and mind.¹¹²

It is perhaps tempting to try and see *Youth Restored* as being just such a self-help “manual” or a “collection of rules” for the understanding of mental well-being. Yet, the problem with any such attempt is that, as suggested earlier in this chapter, the form and structure of *Youth Restored* itself subvert the meaning of precisely such abstract, universal truisms. In fact, the author-figure is quite forthright on this issue in the commentary: “The author, in truth, did not plan to write a book of home remedies: much less did he plan to give medical advice.”¹¹³ What he offers instead is the more modest ambition “to share his gleanings” (“*podelit'sia svoimi znaniiami*”) as a lifetime sufferer from poor mental health.¹¹⁴

An idea of what this ambition amounts to in concrete terms can perhaps be gathered from the author-figure's discussion, early in the commentary, of the suicide of Jack London. Having described the early demise of the American writer, the author-figure asks himself:

What exactly is the inner mechanism of his demise? How can one explain this catastrophe more precisely using simple words, without translating it into the language of science?¹¹⁵

¹¹² «И, читая груду книг, Василек искренне огорчился и жалел, что нет какого-то руководства, какого-то одного сборника правил, по которым надлежало понимать работу своего тела и своей психики.» 3:53.

¹¹³ «Автор, правда, не собирался писать домашнего лечебника и тем более не собирался давать медицинских советов.» 3:115.

¹¹⁴ 3:52.

¹¹⁵ «Какова же внутренняя механика гибели? Как простыми словами, не переводя на язык науки, точнее объяснить механизм этой катастрофы?» 3:84-85.

What the author-figure is looking for is really a sort of everyday grammar of emotional affliction, a language to articulate, understand and discuss mental ill-health. Indeed, this is exactly what he offers his readers over the remainder of the commentary. One does not have to accept his conclusions, or even the relevance of the experiences he relates through his idiosyncratic readings of the tale and the lives of others, but what all can take away from *Youth Restored* is both an assertion of the vital need to understand mental health in subjective terms, and the outline of a language in which to do so.

A Soviet Language of Melancholia

A full appreciation of the significance of this language of mental alienation is possible only when *Youth Restored* is considered in its cultural context. The book is very much a product of the Stalinist 'Revolution from Above': its four year long gestation coincided with the unbridled ideological activism, oppressive labour discipline and giddy cultural tempo of the first Five Year Plan; at this time, of course, the country was also enduring the torments of the forced collectivisation of agriculture, with its resultant famine and displacement. *Youth Restored* itself began to appear shortly after the completion of the first *Piatiletkka*, and was concurrent with the promulgation of the second in 1933. It is against this cultural background that the book needs to be considered; it is this context that explains the frequent references to "overstimulation" and "over-exhaustion" in the discussion of melancholia found in *Youth Restored*.¹¹⁶ In fact, at least as much as it frames the discussion of mental alienation in terms of melancholia, *Youth Restored* uses the term neurasthenia; while just as usefully vague as melancholia, this term also carries the added implication of nervous fatigue,

¹¹⁶ For example: "The basic cause of neurasthenia is the over exhaustion, or rather, the overstimulation of the brain" («Основная причина неврастении – это переутомление, вернее – перераздражение мозга»). 3:121.

making it entirely appropriate to an era of exhaustion following the herculean efforts of the Great Leap Forward. The linking of psychological strain, shattered mental health and the pace of economic transformation is a theme identifiable throughout *Youth Restored*. It is a recurrent motif in many of the letters from readers that are included in the commentary section;¹¹⁷ but it is also made explicit towards the end of the commentary when the author states his surprise at most people's lack of understanding of their own mental health: "it seems to me that knowledge of all this is essential for people who work a lot."¹¹⁸

More importantly though, the stress and strain of the age was marked by a concomitant restriction in available discursive means for making sense of the inevitable mental exhaustion, illness or alienation in subjective terms. It was really only psychoanalysis which offered an explicitly therapeutic discourse seeking to promote subject-centred understanding of mental illness. Even some of the harshest critics of the movement have conceded this fact: Ernest Gellner's sociological study of the psychoanalytic movement thoroughly undermines its shaky scientific pretensions, but acknowledges the hold it has exercised over the twentieth-century imagination primarily in terms of its language of the mind. He notes that "Freudian terminology is an easy-to-learn, plausible jargon" that allowed twentieth-century man to fill in the gaps of an unconvincingly limited Enlightenment account of the mind.¹¹⁹ In fact, "one of the main clues to understanding the significance and impact of psychoanalysis is very simply this: it provided both an idiom and a justification for recognising the *pays reel* [of the human mind]."¹²⁰ This subject-centred therapeutic language taken together with its reimagining of mental malady as fundamentally

¹¹⁷ 3:115-120.

¹¹⁸ «Мне казалось, что знание всего этого необходимо людям, которые много работают.» 3:159.

¹¹⁹ E Gellner, *The Psychoanalytic Movement: The Cunning of Unreason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 191.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 14-15.

continuous with non-pathological mental functioning constitute the most important, and lasting, clinical innovations of the psychoanalytic movement. However, as the discussion in chapter one indicated, the fortunes of psychoanalysis in the Soviet Union waned over the twenties, being branded a bourgeois pseudo-science by the end of the decade and being largely forced beyond the clinical pale by the early thirties.

In the context of the Soviet Union, what remained in the absence of psychoanalytic therapies were various schools of Soviet psychology combining a Marxist outlook with the physiological theory of mind championed by Ivan Pavlov and his followers.¹²¹ Neither of these theoretical foundations leaves much room for a subjective perspective. The Marxist theory of the mind rehearses the Enlightenment ideal of man's innate perfectibility: it admits no inherent source of mental conflict in the human subject; any such conflict can only be a reflection of dialectical contradictions reigning in objective reality.¹²² As Gellner notes, this makes for very limited therapeutic relevance: "Marxism is curiously ill-equipped to offer any kind of pastoral care or solace for individual anguish."¹²³ The idea of reflection at the heart of the Marxist view of mental function represents its closest source of kinship with Pavlov's theory of higher nervous activity. In the Pavlovian view, the mind is constituted only by cortical structures, which in turn produce a straightforward neurological reflection of the organism's surrounding environment. The only way in which the mind can come into conflict with its environment for any prolonged period of time is through concrete physiological dysfunction which can only be ascertained

¹²¹ An important exception is Lev Vygotsky, a former literary critic turned psychologist whose 'historico-cultural' psychology attempted "to unify aesthetic understanding of the mind with scientific explanation of it". However, by the early thirties his theories had been condemned by the authorities and Vygotsky's own early death from tuberculosis in 1934 meant his ambition remained unrealized. See D Joravsky, *Russian Psychology: A Critical History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. xvi and pp. 253-270.

¹²² J McLeish, *Soviet Psychology: History, Theory, Content* (London: Methuen, 1975), p.175.

¹²³ E Gellner, *The Psychoanalytic Movement*, p. 33.

and treated medically. Thus, the melancholic, or indeed the sufferer from any mental malady, would, in the Stalinist thirties, find themselves confronted by a therapeutic establishment dominated by an understanding of mental illness as a physiological anomaly inhibiting the unproblematic mental reflection of the environment.¹²⁴ The patient has no role at all, either in defining the nature of the pathology or in its treatment. All this translated into a very real paucity of acceptable avenues for the discursive understanding of mental illness beyond narrow medical categories based on notions of physiological malfunction. For those wishing to understand and ameliorate mental distress without recourse to medicalization, officially at least, there really was nothing available.

If the stress and strain of the age acted as an aggravating factor in the development of mental ill-health and psychological suffering, and if the paucity of available therapeutic discourses made it difficult to understand and confront them, then the growing ideological intrusiveness of Stalinist culture could only have made these matters worse. Sheila Fitzpatrick notes how “happiness was a kind of civic requirement” throughout the Stalinist thirties.¹²⁵ This collective happiness was in fact part of a broader ideal of the ‘New Soviet Man’ amongst whose cardinal virtues were optimism, cheerfulness, an unquestioning sense of collectivist belonging and unshakeable ideological belief. All citizens were expected to aspire to this ideal and to expunge from their personality all obstacles to its attainment.¹²⁶ The incompatibility of this stifling ideal of socialist humanism with depression, or indeed with any other mental illness, need hardly be emphasized. However, there is perhaps a sense in which depression and melancholia are particularly problematic within the context of

¹²⁴ J McLeish, *Soviet Psychology*, pp. 174-178.

¹²⁵ S Fitzpatrick, ‘Happiness and *Toska*: An Essay in the History of Emotions in Pre-war Soviet Russia’ *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 50:3 (2004), p. 371.

¹²⁶ J McLeish, *Soviet Psychology*, pp. 161-168.

Stalinist ideological orthodoxy. Axiomatic to most understandings of depression is the notion of grief and emotional pain in excess of ostensible cause. Yet in the Soviet context where the system was predicated solely upon the total explanatory potential of the official ideology, there were correspondingly strong restrictions on the discussion of phenomena which defied simple causal explanation in terms of the reigning ideology. With the declaration of the attainment of socialism in one country at the seventeenth party congress in 1934 and the subsequent adoption of the Stalin constitution in 1936, which entrenched the ideological fiction that the material basis of socialism had have been achieved in the Soviet Union, this situation could only have become worse: with the Marxist account of mental alienation and conflict deriving solely from socio-economic contradictions, the attainment of socialism effectively rendered non-pathological mental alienation politically impossible as the socio-economic determinants of alienation (the only ideologically-sanctioned non-medical explanation of alienation) were officially declared to have been overcome. Caught between the political rigors and mental strains of a demanding age, and facing an inflexible and powerful clinical establishment, the soviet melancholic would have found in *Youth Restored* both a discursive space in which to reflect on being-in-the-world, and the basis of an ideologically acceptable therapeutic language for the active management of mental malaise. These same elements of linguistic innovation, existential insight and therapeutic utility would be re-combined and developed even further in Zoshchenko's most philosophically ambitious work *Before Sunrise*, the topic of the final chapter.

Chapter 7

Literary Therapy

The therapeutic language developed in *Youth Restored* is further elaborated in *Before Sunrise*, which was partially published in 1943. The thematic kinship between these two works is asserted in the prologue to *Before Sunrise*. Here Zoshchenko suggests that he “got the idea” (“*zaduma!*”) for *Before Sunrise* “straight after my *Youth Restored* saw the light of day.”¹ Furthermore, when he suggests that he had been collecting the material for *Before Sunrise* for “almost ten years” (“*pochti desiat' let*”) before the completion of that book, he similarly implies that his work on *Before Sunrise* commenced while *Youth Restored* was still relatively hot off the press. In fact, *Before Sunrise* even includes a short, but frank, appraisal of the weaknesses of its predecessor:

Now, when ten years have passed by, I see perfectly the defects of my book [*Youth Restored*]: it was incomplete and one-sided; and, probably, I should have been scolded for this more than I was.²

The conclusion to which the reader is invited is that *Before Sunrise* can, to some degree at least, be regarded as an outgrowth from *Youth Restored*, as an attempt to improve on, even to re-work, the theme broached in that earlier work.

The prologue also contextualizes the genesis of the book in terms of the extensive medical discussions that followed the appearance of *Youth Restored*; it thus locates *Before Sunrise* on the same frontier between literature and medicine as its forebear. That it is envisaged as a continuation of that same debate is reinforced by the fact that over half of the prologue is cast in the form of a dialogue between the author and the famous physiologist Aleksei Speranskii. The choice of Speranskii is

¹ «Сразу после того, как выпустил в свет мою “Возвращенную молодость”».» 3:448.

² «Сейчас, когда прошло десять лет, я отлично вижу дефекты моей книги: она была неполной и однобокой. И, вероятно, за это меня следовало больше бранить, чем меня бранили.» 3:451.

important here: the author notes that he met the famous scientist (and one time student of Pavlov) “in autumn 1934” (“*osen'iu 1934 goda*”), which makes the acquaintance coincide with the period of the medical interest in *Youth Restored*;³ moreover, Speranskii was a physiologist who “devoted all his professional career to studying the part played by the nervous system in the development of pathological processes”, a clinical and academic interest with obvious relevance to the subject of *Youth Restored*.⁴

In many ways, the prologue functions to recap some of the salient points that emerged from those medical discussions of the earlier book. There is a restatement of the fact that the book was primarily a literary production not intended for an exclusively scientific audience; there is also a restatement of the idea developed in *Youth Restored* that literature and medicine to some extent share subject matter.⁵ Zoshchenko may well have felt that such reminders were necessary after the ten-year lapse in time that separates the two books, but, more importantly, it implicitly acknowledges that this old debate from the early thirties must have seemed more than a little extraneous in a Soviet Union which in 1943 was only beginning to turn the tide in a fight for its very existence. The question of timeliness is a significant challenge confronting *Before Sunrise*, as Zoshchenko was fully aware. In the preface he notes precisely this fact, suggesting that it exercised his conscience before he set himself to writing the book:

I was leafing through these notebooks [containing the materials that would become *Before Sunrise*], bitterly regretting that there had been no time to get down to this work, so apparently unnecessary

³ 3:451.

⁴ Obituary: A. D. Speransky, M.D., *British Medical Journal*, 2:5249 (12 August 1961), p.459.

⁵ 3:450-451. Zoshchenko even repeats a metaphor he used in *Youth Restored* which compared the writer's need to study psychology with the artist's need to study anatomy. See 3:127 and 3:450.

now, so far removed from the war, from the thunder of guns and the screech of shells.⁶

Thus, perfectly conscious of how distant it was from the real concerns of the moment, the author still proposed to place the book before the war-weary Soviet reader. In justifying this undertaking he argues that, in talking “about the triumph of human reason, about science, about the progress of consciousness”, the work “refutes the ‘philosophy’ of fascism” in so far as it undermines a putative Nazi appeal to instinct and unreason.⁷ However, if Zoshchenko was hoping to make a propagandistic contribution to the Soviet war effort by re-casting an old theme in terms of the struggle against fascism, then in this he singularly failed. *Before Sunrise* was famously withdrawn from publication half-way through its serialization in the journal *Oktiabr'* amid a storm of vituperative criticism whipped up by the authorities.⁸

It will be argued later in this chapter that the equation of the book's central theme with the Soviet struggle against Nazi aggression is much more than a gesture of patriotism or an attempt to make the book acceptable for a wartime readership; however, at this point it is important to note only that the author's assertion of the work's value in the fight against Nazi unreason reveals an important way in which the discussion in *Before Sunrise* moves beyond that staged in *Youth Restored*: it introduces a deep concern with the irrational. The discussion in *Youth Restored* tended to restrict itself to the conscious control of one's mental well-being, but it actually had very little to say about irrational or instinctual forces. To be sure, in his reflections on the nature of inspiration and creativity, the author-figure in *Youth*

⁶ «Я перелисывал эти тетради, горько сожалея, что не пришло время приняться за эту работу, столь, казалось, ненужную сейчас, столь отдаленную от войны, от грохота пушек и визга снарядов.» 3:449.

⁷ «[...] о торжестве человеческого разума, о науке, о прогрессе сознания! Моя работа опровергает ‘философию’ фашизма». 3:449

⁸ See G Carleton, *The Politics of Reception*, pp. 3-4 for a concise summary of the campaign of vilification directed at *Before Sunrise* in 1943.

Restored acknowledged that “sublimation” (“*sublimatsiia*”) and the “subconscious” (“*podsoznanie*”) have a role to play in psychic function, but the nature of this role and the relevant psychic dynamics are passed over in complete silence.⁹ By contrast, *Before Sunrise* is structured as a pitched battle between the powers of unreason and rational control within the bounds of the melancholic subject.

That melancholic subject is the lonely figure of the narrator. Just as the author-figure in *Youth Restored* held the separate elements of that fragmentary work in some kind of order, so too the authorial voice in *Before Sunrise* comes to exercise a presiding coherence over the disjunctive forces reigning within this book. However, the key difference between the two is that the confessional aspect of *Before Sunrise* is far stronger and much more prominent than in its predecessor. There is no author-figure discussed in the third person, there is no authorial ‘we’; from the outset the reader is addressed by a calm, first-person singular voice completely denuded of ironic inflection or comic distance. It will be recalled that in *Youth Restored*, the authorial voice had a comparable degree of parodic distance to that of *Sentimental Tales*; moreover, the confessional aspects of *Youth Restored*, while undoubtedly present, were deliberately attenuated. In *Before Sunrise*, from the outset and throughout, the reader is invited to assume a much closer relation between the narrator and the elusive voice of the writer himself.

In his dialogue with Speranskii, the narrator also offers a disarmingly succinct and straightforward description of the purpose of *Before Sunrise*: “In short, this is a book about how I rid myself of much unnecessary grief and became happy.”¹⁰ It is important to pause and take note of this sentence for two reasons. Firstly, it only claims *Before Sunrise* to be an *account* of Zoshchenko’s auto-therapy, and not that

⁹ 3:93-96; 3:143-149.

¹⁰ «Вкратце - это книга о том, как я избавился от многих ненужных огорчений и стал счастливым.» 3:451.

therapy itself; the book is thus explicitly descriptive and elaborative, and presumably intended primarily for the edification of others rather than being written for immediate autotherapeutic need. Secondly, the sentence makes the book's concern with melancholia both explicit and dominant. This is worth remembering because it has not been uncommon for critics in the past to downplay the centrality of the struggle with melancholia in *Before Sunrise* in order to privilege other interpretations.¹¹ The book may well not be limited to the description of a personal struggle with melancholia, indeed this study shall argue that this is precisely the case; however, melancholia is central to *Before Sunrise* and if the theme of melancholia is sidelined then much that is distinctive about the book is marginalized along with it.

The prominence of the author's struggle with depression and melancholy receives further reinforcement in the first chapter of *Before Sunrise*, which outlines the history of Zoshchenko's mental ill-health from its earliest adolescent manifestations through to the particularly savage relapses of 1926/27 that have already been discussed earlier in this study. The first chapter of *Before Sunrise* borrows its title from a desperate line in one of Edgar Allan Poe's most melancholy letters: "I am wretched, and know not why."¹² The reference is worth exploring in depth for several reasons. The most obvious is that the melancholic content of the letter in question reinforces the centrality of the melancholic theme in *Before Sunrise*. Ostensibly an expression of gratitude to his friend and patron John Pendleton Kennedy for help in obtaining much needed literary employment, Poe's letter quickly becomes dominated by the writer's desperate need to voice his melancholic torments, a depression all the more inexplicable for its continuance in the face of improved

¹¹ See, for example, the discussions of Rachel May's and Gregory Carleton's works on Zoshchenko in the introduction to this study.

¹² «Я несчастен – и не знаю почему.» 3:453. The line is taken from Poe's letter to John Pendleton Kennedy of 11th September 1835.

circumstances. This melancholic shadow in the midst of worldly success has a particular appropriateness for Zoshchenko's melancholic sufferings, which, in the twenties and thirties, seemed most pronounced at the points when he was writing some of his best works, and when his literary star was definitively in the ascendant.¹³

The similarity between the two melancholy writers that this allusion brings into focus is actually far deeper than this. In fact, Poe's letter, in its yearning to give expression to the melancholic self while simultaneously being conscious of its awkward transgression of discursive convention, makes for a neat summation of the central problem of *Before Sunrise*. The relevant passage is thus worth quoting at length:

Excuse me, my dear Sir, if in this letter you find much incoherency. My feelings at this moment are pitiable indeed. I am suffering under a depression of spirits such as I have never felt before. I have struggled in vain against the influence of this melancholy — *You will believe me* when I say that I am still miserable in spite of the great improvement in my circumstances. I say you will believe me, and for this simple reason, that a man who is writing for *effect* does not write *thus*. My heart is open before you — if it be worth reading, read it. I am wretched, and know not why. Console me — for you can. But let it be quickly — or it will be too late. Write me immediately. Convince me that it is worth one's while — that it is at all necessary to live, and you will prove yourself indeed my friend. Persuade me to do what is right. I do not mean this — I do not mean that you should consider what I now write you a jest — oh pity me! for I feel that my words are incoherent — but I will recover myself. You will not fail to see that I am suffering under a depression of spirits which will not fail to ruin me should it be long continued. Write me then, and quickly.¹⁴

This passage, written over a hundred years previously and a world away from the Soviet Union of the forties, seems, nonetheless, to point precisely to the way in which *Before Sunrise* begs to be read. In fact, so much of what this passage says finds direct

¹³ Chukovskii actually pointed out this very fact to the writer in 1930: see B Samov, 'Zoshchenko v dnevnikakh Chukovskogo', *Znamia*, 1987, 6, p. 195 [pp. 185-196].

¹⁴ From a letter of Edgar Allan Poe to John Pendleton Kennedy of 11th September 1835, reprinted in Arthur Hobson Quinn, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p.225. Emphases in the original.

reflection in *Before Sunrise* itself. The twice stated fear of incoherence, really a concern about the breakdown not only in narrative coherence but also of style and epistolary convention, seems particularly salient in this regard as it echoes a similar sentiment voiced by the narrator of *Before Sunrise*. At the end of the prologue, just before quoting the line from Poe, Zoshchenko makes a similar apology in advance for stylistic lapses: "Psychic agitation will shake the style. Anxieties will extinguish the learning. Nerves will be perceived as haste."¹⁵ This anticipated roughness of style is ostensibly attributed to the exigencies of writing in wartime, a reason that only partly convinces given the fact that the same prologue stresses the book's genesis reaching far back into the thirties; in fact, the repeated references to psychological stress and disturbance really point to a fear of melancholic incoherence comparable to that expressed by Poe. *Before Sunrise* is very much a book teetering on the brink of incoherence; it defies any easy classification: part-autobiography, part-popular scientific treatise, part auto-therapeutic testimonial, it seems constantly poised on the border between the confessional and the explanatory, the factual and the fictional. Beneath the precarious unity lent to it by the melancholy narrator, these heterogeneous discursive modes find an uneasy coexistence, but the disjuncture at the heart of the book is never definitively overcome.

This discursive heterogeneity and formal ambiguity is a reflection of the attempt in *Before Sunrise*, just like that in Poe's letter, to inscribe the melancholic self into extant discursive modes. It is thus a confessional gesture; as Poe said in the letter referenced in the first chapter of *Before Sunrise*: "a man who is writing for effect does not write thus". This open-hearted confessional pose is further reinforced intertextually: the line immediately preceding the one that Zoshchenko quotes in

¹⁵ «Душевные волнения поколеблют стиль. Тревоги погасят знания. Нервность воспримется как торопливость.» 3:453.

Before Sunrise reads, “my heart is open before you – if it be worth reading, read it.”

This is precisely what the narrator asks of his readers in *Before Sunrise*: to read the book not as jest or gesture, but as an act of self disclosure. This confessional narrator, being forced to shoulder the burden of narrative coherence single-handedly, acquires an almost vertiginous sense of isolation. This stifling loneliness is again shared with the melancholic voice in Poe’s letter, whose breaks into imagined conversation and intrusive self-reflection only deepen his stated desperation to hear the voice of another. This longing for the words of others, for a way out of the melancholy underground of the self rings throughout *Before Sunrise*; the book seems almost to cry out for a shared discourse, an open correspondence, or even simply another voice. Yet this is largely unforthcoming; the only constructive intersubjective exchanges occur once the cure has been purportedly effected and are recounted as recollection. The way out of the stifling alienation of melancholic selfhood, for both Poe and Zoshchenko, is through the creation of personal meaning.

What is particularly noteworthy about the Poe reference in particular, and indeed the whole first chapter of *Before Sunrise*, is its evocation of the abdication of meaning lying at the heart of the melancholic condition; this defines the nature of the melancholic suffering that *Before Sunrise* confronts, but it also, in turn, defines the challenge of overcoming it as the need to wrench meaning from apparently causeless suffering. That the struggle described in *Before Sunrise* becomes primarily a struggle to fix meaning is quickly confirmed as the book moves onto a description of the first part of the narrator’s autotherapy. This process of meaning creation involves attaching a reason to the meaningless torments of melancholia. Unable to accept suffering without reason, the narrator eventually decides that the elusive cause of his mental suffering must lie in his past life:

And suddenly I clearly understood that the cause of my misfortunes lay in my life. There was no doubt – something took place, something happened that affected me in a dispiriting way.¹⁶

Thus, the narrator decides the answer to his sufferings will be revealed only through a systematic trawl through his own memory: “Then I thought: it is necessary to remember my life.”¹⁷ Before he even starts his anamnesis the narrator faces a hermeneutic problem; he realizes that in order to avoid being overwhelmed by a mass of recollections unconnected to his purpose, he will need some sort of selection criteria: “I understood straight away that nothing would come from this without introducing some kind of system to my recollections.”¹⁸ He explains that he chose what he calls “psychic agitation” (“*dushevnoe volnenie*”) to be the guiding principle in selecting relevant memories, stating that that: “Psychic agitation, like magnesium light, lit up what had taken place. These were photographic moments lodged in my mind.”¹⁹ It is important to note the full implication of this simile. The artificiality of the metaphoric light source and the evocation of the art of photography serve definitively to underscore the constructive aspects in what the narrator tries to portray as a detached, impartial process of recollection. While maintaining the pretence to some kind of free association, his anamnesis is actually being subtly, but definitively, channeled into a particular hermeneutic framework. Crucially though, the narrator feigns ignorance of the implications of his own metaphor and admits no attenuation of the objectivity of his technique.

¹⁶ «И вдруг я понял ясно, что причина моих несчастий кроется в моей жизни. Нет сомнения – что-то случилось, что-то произошло такое, что подействовало на меня угнетающим образом.» 3:462.

¹⁷ «Тогда я подумал: надо вспоминать мою жизнь.» 3:462.

¹⁸ «Но сразу понял, что из этого ничего не выйдет, если не внести какую-нибудь систему в мои воспоминания.» 3:462.

¹⁹ «Душевное волнение, как свет магния, осветило то, что произошло. Это были моментальные фотографии, оставшиеся на память в моем мозгу.» 3:462.

The narrator commences his anamnestic project in the section entitled 'Fallen Leaves' ('Opavshie list'ia'). The name is an allusion to a confessional work by the Symbolist writer and philosopher Vasilii Rozanov which appeared in two volumes in 1913 and 1915. The importance of the Rozanov reference is not only that it reinforces the confessional aspect of *Before Sunrise* by citing a similarly personal work; the anamnestic records of this part of *Before Sunrise* are presented in a way that recalls the detached, incompleteness of Rozanov's late style. As Avril Pyman notes, Rozanov, "a profound subjectivist", developed a "mature prose style" that was "an extension *ne plus ultra* of the intimate style adumbrated by Dostoevsky in *Notes from Underground* and *The Diary of a Writer*: aphoristic, throw-away, take it or leave it."²⁰ This is precisely what the reader is offered in this section and the next, which between them contain around one hundred recalled vignettes. These are distinct episodes, unconnected by narrative, recalled from the life of the writer between the ages of two and thirty-two. They, therefore, quite neatly correspond to the period of 'youth' as defined in *Youth Restored*.

These youthful recollections are as artistically satisfying as anything else that Zoshchenko ever wrote; miracles of concision and clarity. taken together these vignettes nonetheless feel dense with meaning. Yet, it is a meaning that always manages to elude fixity or interpretation; one that seems tauntingly proximate, but is always somehow already around the next corner. The reader thus feels perpetually on the threshold of some sort of hermeneutic significance, but unable to capture this perfectly in either thought or word. The recollections thus conform to a typically symbolist notion of groping or growing towards some kind of metaphysical verity; a kind of meaning that is always becoming, robed in words but ultimately ineffable.

²⁰ A Pyman, *A History of Russian Symbolism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 137.

The Rozanov allusion noted earlier is perhaps especially relevant in this sense: Rozanov regarded his “fallen leaves” as slivers of his very soul, artefacts of a living essence that precede and exceed all discursive logic, philosophical aim or textual re-working: a sort of automatic writing of the divine life force.²¹ On the basis of the centrality of potential, growth and becoming to the infant psyche, Rozanov modelled his creative persona on a perception of the infant nature as a kind of biological nirvana. Pyman notes the implications of this outlook for the literary word:

Words cannot be assigned an exact meaning ... they, too, have ‘potential’. To write as the child plays, using whatever small things come to hand, is to start off a process of growth and change.²²

This is precisely the effect that is attained when the vignettes that make up the first half of *Before Sunrise* are read together; the notion of an extra-linguistic truth gestured towards but ultimately indefinable is an abiding feature of this written ‘youth’.

This effect derives from the way that the narratively unconnected episodes in *Before Sunrise* are rendered mutually suggestive through a dense pattern of metaphoric and metonymic interconnectivity. In a way that is comparable to the Freudian primary processes of condensation and displacement, the disparate vignettes coalesce into a kind of unity through shared symbolic resonances. Some idea of this can be gleaned from comparing two of the vignettes, for instance, the one entitled ‘Someone has Drowned’ (‘Kto-to utonul’) and the one called ‘Yes, He’s Dead’ (‘Da, on umer’). In ‘Someone has Drowned’ the young narrator recalls witnessing a drowned youth being retrieved from the river.

²¹ Ibid, p. 137. See also R Poggioli, *Rozanov* (London: Bowes and Bowes, 1962), pp. 26-28.

²² A Pyman, *A History of Russian Symbolism*, p. 133.

He is white, like paper. His eyes are closed. His arms are spread out to the sides, and his body is covered up with green twigs. Nearby a woman is on her knees. She stares fixedly at his dead face.²³

The narrator learns from a passer-by that the silent staring figure is the drowned youth's mother and that her stunned silence arises from the enormity of her grief. The narrator wills the corpse to move and renounce his death, "but he lies completely still, and it becomes so terrifying to me that I close my eyes."²⁴

In the episode entitled 'Yes, He's Dead' ('Da, on umer') the narrator witnesses another scene of a dead man mourned by a distraught woman, although this time it is the narrator's father and mother. The narrator remains strangely detached throughout the episode, watching from a door and unable to replicate the intensity of his mother's grief. This detachment he imputes to his having "a closed heart" ("*zakrytoe serdtse*"), a phrase echoing a comment his mother made about his father and himself in a vignette from a few pages earlier.²⁵ Driven mad with "awful grief" ("*uzhasnoe gore*"), the mother imagines that her husband may simply be deeply unconscious and resolves to test his mortality for herself:

Mother unfastens a pin from her blouse. Then she takes father's hand. And I see – she wants to pierce his hand. I cry out with horror.

"There's no need to scream", says mother, "I want to look, perhaps he's not dead."

She pierces right through the hand with the pin. I scream again. Mother pulls the pin out through the pierced palm.

"Look", she says, "not a single drop of blood. Yes, he's dead..."²⁶

²³ «Он белый, как бумага. Глаза у него закрыты. Руки раскинуты в стороны, а тело его прикрыто зелеными веточками. Рядом с ним на коленях стоит женщина. Она пристально смотрит в его мертвое лицо.» 3:533.

²⁴ «Но он лежит неподвижно. И мне делается так страшно, что я закрываю глаза.» 3:533.

²⁵ 3:546. Earlier mention at 3:543.

²⁶ «Мать отстегивает булавку от своей блузки. Потом берет руку отца. И я вижу – она хочет булавкой проколоть ему руку. Я вскрикиваю от ужаса.

- Не надо кричать, - говорит мать, - я хочу посмотреть, может быть, он не умер.

Булавкой она прокалывает руку насквозь. Я снова кричу. Мать вынимает булавку из проколотой ладони.

As his mother begins to cry uncontrollably again, the narrator cannot look any more: "I leave the room; I am shaking with fever."²⁷ These two vignettes are distinct in terms of narrative, time and character, yet they are similar in structure. There is the same combination of dead man and mourning woman wracked by the unpredictability of grief. The same bloodlessness of death strikes the narrator: the paper white face of the drowned youth and the pierced hand that will not bleed. There is even a shared sense of premature death across the two pieces: the drowned youth is just eighteen;²⁸ the father is forty-nine - "he's still young" says the distraught widow.²⁹ Both scenes share a moment of vainly willed defiance in the face of death: by the narrator in the first; by his mother in the second. Finally, both episodes are too much for the young narrator to bear: he closes his eyes in terror at the sight of the drowned youth; he leaves the room in febrile horror having witnessed his mother's mutilating love for his father. To be sure there are differences: most notably, the drowned youth is a stranger, while the dead man is the narrator's father; yet even here, the narrator regards both episodes with the same strange detachment; this has the effect of eroding the difference between his relationships with the protagonists.

Shades of the same anamnestic archetype can be seen in many other vignettes. Pallor and bloodlessness accompany all men who, like the narrator's father, represent the dying old world of Imperial Russia. Thus, the imperious patron who has to be petitioned for a pension following the death of the narrator's father is "extremely elderly, slender, pallid" ("*ves'ma star, sukhoshchav, bleden*").³⁰ This is even more pronounced in the episode entitled 'The Spirit is Higher, Young Man' ('*Dukh vyshe,*

- Погляди, - говорит она, - нет ни капельки крови. Да, он умер...» 3:546.

²⁷ «Я выхожу из комнаты. Меня трясет лихорадка.» 3:546.

²⁸ 3:532-533.

²⁹ «[О]н совсем молодой.» 3:546.

³⁰ 3:591.

molodoi chelovek'). In this episode, the coquettish wife of a lawyer sends her husband to swim in the sea while she indulges an awkward flirtation with the adolescent narrator on the shore. As the lawyer changes for swimming:

I see his stunted body, his sunken, sickly chest, and his feeble arms, devoid of musculature. Catching my gaze on him, the court official mutters:

"The spirit is higher, young man. The spirit, and not the body – this is our concern, our beauty."

Carefully stepping on the sand, Serge, as if walking on nails, goes down to the water. His arms, thin and lifeless, dangle like whips.³¹

Although there is no actual death or grief, the lifelessness of the husband's sickly physique evokes the powerlessness and immanence of death, while the wife's roving eye, ever ready to alight on a new amorous object, indicates not grief, but a completed mourning for an emotionally dead relationship. The husband's invocation of the spirit over the flesh has a degree of desperation, a delusional quality which serves only to emphasize the pallid, formal, lifelessness of the whole scene.

This is just a small sample of the symbolic resonances which sound throughout all the recalled vignettes; in this way all are bound into a web of poetic significance that eludes either concrete meaning or linguistic schema. While Rozanov's fallen leaves are left in this amorphous state, deliberately kept safe from the 'deadening' effect of philosophical pretext or editorial plan, Zoshchenko's are conscientiously edited. They are grouped by date and interspersed with a commentary in the style of a detached 'analyst' figure; this in turn casts the voice that narrates the recalled vignettes as something like an unknowing 'analysand'. Both voices remain

³¹ «Я вижу чахлое его тело. Впалую чахоточную грудь. И жалкие руки, лишённые мускулов. Увидя на себе мой взор, судебный работник бормочет:

- Дух выше, молодой человек. Дух, а не тело – вот в чём наша забота, наша красота. Осторожно ступая на песок, Серж, как по гвоздям, идет к воде. Его руки, худые и безжизненные, болтаются, как плети.» 3:594.

fully attributable to the author, so the effect that results is of an author re-reading that automatic writing of his own soul which Rozanov was so anxious to leave untouched. The process of ordering adopted by the 'analyst' is paradoxical and strikingly complex. The recollections are grouped in such a way that they recede in temporal sequence: they proceed from 1912 to 1926, before going back to 1899 when the narrator was five years of age and then proceeding to fifteen years of age, before going back to the age of two years and proceeding to five. Importantly the dating convention of these groupings changes half way through: the recollections from the ages of eighteen to thirty-two are grouped by calendar year (i.e. 1912 to 1926); meanwhile those from the age of two onwards are grouped according the narrator's age without reference to the date. What this obfuscatory schema achieves is to hide the fact that, although ostensibly covering the age range of two to thirty-two years of age, there are in actual fact three years missing from the narrator's anamnesis: from 1909 to 1912 when the narrator would have been between fifteen and eighteen years old. Crucially though, as with the telling photographic metaphor, the narrator seems completely oblivious to these not insignificant gaps in the scientific objectivity that he claims for his method.

As the narrator stretches his memory to reach further and further back in time he runs up against a predictable hitch: the earliest years of infancy lie beyond the threshold of memory. To some extent, this is a problem that the narrator had foreseen all along: at one point he suggests the age of five as the earliest realistic source of memory because before then he remembers "almost nothing".³² Yet, when his recollections from this age yield nothing conclusive, he resolves to try and extend his memory back even further to two years of age. At this point he reiterates the earlier

³² «Я почти ничего не помню.» 3:522.

problem of infant amnesia: "However, it turned out to be not so easy to remember these years. They were obscured in a kind of deadening fog."³³ With some effort, the narrator struggles to penetrate this symbolist-sounding fog of forgetting:

And there, through the faraway fog of oblivion, I suddenly began to recollect something like separate moments, snatches, broken-off scenes, lit up by some kind of strange light.

What exactly could light up these scenes? Perhaps, terror? Or the psychic agitation of the child? Yes, probably terror and psychic agitation cut through the obscuring wraps, in which my infant life was shrouded.³⁴

It will be recalled that "psychic agitation" was to be the "magnesium light" that illuminated the relevance of particular memories for the explanation of the narrator's melancholia; as the definitive criteria guiding the direction of the anamnesis, it therefore constitutes the first indication of the process of authorial selection and interpretation which, while little commented on by the narrator, accompanies each step in the autotherapy described in *Before Sunrise*. Indeed, the strange illumination mentioned in the passage above is precisely this flash of penetrating magnesium light: it is the flash of authorial interpretation and constructive intervention which complicates the free association that the narrator ostensibly strives for. This of course distorts the objectivity that the narrator claims for his approach: what purports to be the impartial outcome of logical deduction begins to resemble a turn in an elaborate piece of circular reasoning, the outcome of which was determined even before the process of recollection commenced. Yet again though, the narrator seems unaware of his transgressions against scientific method.

³³ «Однако, вспомнить эти годы оказалось нелегко. Они были овеяны каким-то тусклым туманом.» 3:558.

³⁴ «И вот, сквозь далекий туман забвения, я вдруг стал припоминать какие-то отдельные моменты, обрывки, разорванные сцены, освещенные каким-то странным светом. / Что же могло осветить эти сцены? Может быть, страх? Или душевное волнение ребенка? Да, вероятно, страх и душевное волнение прорвали тусклую пелену, которой была обернута моя младенческая жизнь.» 3:558.

The interpretative leaps and interventions of the narrator become an increasing feature of the process as the reader reaches the end of the anamnestic part of *Before Sunrise*; his editorial presence and the concomitant intrusion of his constructive efforts at the expense of psychological observation becoming more acute. Gregory Carleton has drawn attention to this aspect of *Before Sunrise*, noting that “the further Zoshchenko’s own search extends into the past, the more his empiricism slides.”³⁵ Indeed, as the narrator reaches the limits of his conscious memory without finding the key to understanding his melancholia, his active interpretative interventions come to completely overshadow any dispassionate observation of psychological phenomena. Unable to stimulate any recollection from beyond “the thick grey fog” (“*seryi plotnyi tuman*”) of infant amnesia, the narrator becomes convinced that the reason for his melancholic sufferings must lie shrouded in these early years of infancy.³⁶ At this point he invokes the presiding colossus of the Soviet science of the mind: Ivan Pavlov. The narrator concludes that his melancholic sufferings must have arisen as a result of neural connections formed according to a Pavlovian pattern during infancy: “It seemed to me that my unhappiness could have arisen because erroneous conditional connections were formed in my infant brain, which frightened me in later life.”³⁷ The reason for the resort to Pavlov here is that the extreme plasticity of the Pavlovian mind seems to offer the narrator hope in his desire “to destroy these erroneous mechanisms that have arisen in my brain.”³⁸ It is crucial, however, to note the order of this revelation: the narrator is *intuitively convinced* that the cause of his mental ill-health lies in his infancy and that it is amenable to cure *before* he reaches for Pavlov to justify his conviction. Pavlovian psycho-physiology does not lead the

³⁵ G Carleton, *The Politics of Reception*, p.144.

³⁶ 3:563.

³⁷ «Мне показалось, что мое несчастье могло возникнуть оттого, что в моем младенческом мозгу созданы были неверные условные связи, которые устрашали меня в дальнейшем.» 3:568.

³⁸ «[...] разрушить эти ошибочные механизмы, возникшие в моем мозгу.» 3:568.

narrator to his conclusion; that conclusion is actually already formed and Pavlov provides a workable, ideologically acceptable conceptual vocabulary for the narrator to dress up his conviction in the robes of scientific respectability.

However, the problem is that, for all the reassuring psychic adaptability it appears to offer, Pavlov's conception of the mind as part of an open organic system, shaped in normal function by the external environment, does not leave space for either subjective knowledge or willed cure of mental affliction. Thus the narrator's yearning to sever the erroneous neural connections he believes to lie at the heart of his neurotic complex is hampered by the absence of a Pavlovian equivalent of the Freudian transference space: the means of bringing the pathology into subjective consciousness. In the end the narrator comes to dream interpretation as the only way to overcome this problem. As he acknowledges himself, by the twentieth-century, dream interpretation was all but synonymous with psychoanalysis: nonetheless, the narrator tries to wrestle the technique from the Freudian stranglehold.³⁹ The irony is that he does this in ways which recall the arguments Freud himself used in commending the technique to a skeptical medical establishment.⁴⁰ Thus, he stresses the classical origins of dream interpretation and he makes the argument that it offers a temporary solution while neurological science is insufficiently developed to offer an alternative:

Science is incomplete. Truth is the daughter of time. Other, more accurate approaches will be found. For now though, with the help of thorough dream analysis, we can catch a glimpse into the far away world of the infant, into that world not controlled by reason, into that world of oblivion, where sometimes the source of our misfortunes originates.⁴¹

³⁹ 3:569-571.

⁴⁰ S Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Vintage, 2001), Vol. 4.

⁴¹ «Наука несовершенна. Истина – дочь времени. Будет найдены иные, более точные пути. Пока же с помощью тщательного анализа сновидения мы можем заглянуть в далекий мир младенца, в

The narrator tries to recall his dreams and realizes that he is haunted by the recurrence of three particular dream motifs: "And here I recalled that most often I see tigers which come into my room, beggars who stand at my door and the sea in which I swim."⁴² In a way that recalls Freud, the narrator then begins to analyze these motifs as complex constructions of the dream-work which are broken down further into a complex of four "painful objects" ("*bol'nye predmety*") grounded in infant traumas.

These painful objects are: water (*voda*), the hand (*ruka*), the breast (*grud'*) and the stroke or blow (*udar*).⁴³ The image of the tiger, primarily in its roar and predatory nature, is held to be a symbol which combines aspects of the punishing and vengeful 'hand' and the shock of the 'stroke' or 'blow'. It is suggested that the preconscious origins of the image are to be found in an infant operation performed on the narrator without anesthetic.⁴⁴ The image of the beggar, with his outstretched hand and hungry lovelessness, unites the 'hand' that deprives with the 'breast' that nourishes, forming a neurotic ambivalence directed at care, nutrition and ultimately all woman-kind. It is thus unsurprising that the origins of the beggar motif turn out to be located in two specific weaning traumas. The first pertains to the narrator's mother encouraging him to wean by smearing quinine on her nipples, thus forming a pathological association in the mind of the infant between women, food and poison.⁴⁵ The second trauma concerns an incident when the narrator's mother dropped him while feeding during a thunder storm; the combination of the clap of thunder and interrupted feeding was

тот мир, который не контролируется разумом, в тот мир забвения, откуда иной раз берут начало источники наших бед.» 3:575.

⁴² «И тут я припомнил, что чаще всего я вижу тигров, которые входят в мою комнату, нищих, которые стоят у моих дверей, и море, в котором я купаюсь.» 3:576

⁴³ 3:613.

⁴⁴ 3:608-610.

⁴⁵ 3:610.

apparently amplified by the terror of the mother which the infant narrator literally “imbibed with her milk.”⁴⁶

There is a pleasing economy to the complex of “painful objects” uncovered by this process. From the perspective of the melancholic narrator, their principal benefit is that they allow the psychodynamics of his melancholic neurosis to be formed into a narrative. Thus they are rendered at once visible to his conscious self, amenable to understanding and, because all stories can be re-written, amenable to adaptation. In terms of the cure he claims for himself, this allows the narrator to historicize his depression by positing the cause of his neurosis in an infant reality that can be plausibly rejected as having no meaning in the psychic world of the adult. Importantly, these same “painful objects” resonate satisfyingly with the recalled vignettes that make up the first half of the book. Turning back, for instance, to the first recollection entitled ‘I’m Busy’ (‘Ia zaniat’), the reader particularly notes that the frustrated young wife making eyes at the adolescent narrator is described as “like a young tigress from the zoological gardens – such bright, radiant, blinding colours.”⁴⁷ What passed by as merely evocative description when read first time around, now seems dense with psychological significance when re-read in the light of the “painful objects”: the image of the young, flirtatious, married woman as a caged tigress whose bright coloration builds progressively to blinding seems to contain within itself the ambivalent allure and threat that Zoshchenko’s dream analyses located in the symbolic ‘breast’. Moreover, it will be remembered that the tiger was a recurrent dream motif linked to the ‘hand’ of punishment and the ‘stroke’ or ‘blow’: the expectation of punishment is a potent part of the heady mix of burgeoning young desire and conjugal proscription that permeates this whole episode. All the other

⁴⁶ «Я всосал с ее молоком.» 3:611.

⁴⁷ «Она похожа на молодую тигрицу из зоологического сада – такие же яркие, сияющие, ослепительные краски.» 3:463.

vignettes, with their catalogue of floods, drownings, storms, thieves, beggars, animals on the loose and strained relations with women, are just as responsive to interpretation in the light of the “painful objects”. The extensive symbolic resonances that emerge on re-reading the vignettes serve to lend a kind of retrospective credence to the later dream analyses and the complex of “painful objects” in which they result.

Irene Masing-Delic characterizes this aspect of *Before Sunrise* as structurally akin to a mystery story.⁴⁸ By this, she means the way in which ‘clues’ set in the first half of the book feed into the ‘discovery’ of the “painful objects” and create the heuristic effect that is intrinsic to the genre. However, her metaphor is also interesting in a perhaps unintended way: the heuristic aspect of any mystery story is carefully constructed to create its desired effect; much the same can be said about the heuristic aspect of *Before Sunrise* itself. The sense in which the revelatory outcome is subtly constructed is implied by the way that dreams repeatedly appear as if in answer to questions posed in conscious thought. Thus, Carleton notes that the narrator’s dream analysis “has the tendency not just to uncover but to produce the desired data”.⁴⁹ Pondering the place of the ‘hand’ in the tiger motif, for instance, the narrator suggests: “And here, while analyzing this symbolic image of the tiger, I had a dream which corroborated the accuracy and correctness of this symbol.”⁵⁰ It is difficult in this to separate the mutual suggestiveness of the two reflections; this is a problem because, for the narrator’s dream interpretation to attain the scientific objectivity he claims for it, it is important that the dream be impartial and unmotivated. Another similarly confused sense of dream, memory and desire impossibly entwined together can be seen a page earlier:

⁴⁸ I Masing-Delic, ‘Biology, Reason and Literature’, p.79.

⁴⁹ G Carleton, *The Politics of Reception*, p.144.

⁵⁰ «И вот, анализируя этот символический образ тигра, я увидел сон, который подтвердил точность и правильность этого символа.» 3:608.

I remembered a dream from long ago. Perhaps it wasn't even a dream. Perhaps my memory had preserved something which had actually happened at some point; but this remained in my memory as a dream.⁵¹

Again, it is difficult here to disentangle what causes what; the effect is that the reliability of all the epistemological components of this process of self knowing become equally prejudiced.

This situation becomes still more ambiguous when one realizes that the specific infant traumas, the knowledge of which was instrumental in fixing the meaning of the dreams, were arrived at primarily by raiding the stock of family anecdotes. The narrator's knowledge of them thus preceded the interpretative project described in *Before Sunrise* and so they hardly qualify as the outcome of objective psychological observation. This is made explicit when the narrator actually describes his mother relating his infant eccentricities (including the important weaning traumas): "while recalling these eccentricities, mother would say that all this probably arose because of her."⁵² Not only has the narrator's mother planted these ideas in his head, she even offers them as the plausibly sounding psychological origin for which they later become used in the autotherapeutic narrative staged in *Before Sunrise*. Zoshchenko's mother died in 1920, six years before the autotherapeutic process described in *Before Sunrise* commenced; therefore this discussion and the crucial information it yielded must have taken place before the dream interpretations that the narrator describes. In fact, the reader does not even have to know the actual date of Zoshchenko's mother's death to work out that it, and the crucial information about weaning, predated the autotherapy described in *Before Sunrise*: her funeral is actually

⁵¹ «Я вспомнил давний сон. Быть может, даже это не был сон. Быть может, память сохранила то, что когда-то произошло наяву. Но это осталось в памяти как сновидение.» 3:607.

⁵² «Припоминая эти странности, мать говорила, что все это, вероятно, возникло из-за нее.» 3:610.

described in one of the book's recalled vignettes for the period 1917 to 1920, implicating her in the process of recollection and making for a confusing circularity of psychological reference.⁵³

The narrator's claims of scientific objectivity are further dented by the fact that his dream analysis stimulates a whole raft of extra recollections to confirm his conclusions, but which he was strangely unable to recover during the anamnestic part of *Before Sunrise*. Before relating a collection of such memories he admits:

I probably wouldn't have remembered these scenes if I hadn't already thought about what I'm thinking about now, trying to understand from where this pain, this joy and regret arise.⁵⁴

This sense of an interpretative logic creating its own corroborating evidence becomes even more obvious in the later parts of *Before Sunrise*, especially once the narrator has effected his cure. He reinforces his new outlook by dredging up other memories which, although contemporaneous with the melancholic recollections of the first half, seem to be free from the pathological symbolism that characterized the early ones. That these memories confirm the new pattern of his thoughts is proudly emphasized by the narrator. Before relating the story entitled 'Poor Fedia' ('Bednyi Fedia'), the narrator notes: "This is a story from ages past. And I would not have remembered it, but the conclusions which I reached unexpectedly revived this story in my memory."⁵⁵ A similar sentiment is expressed at the start of the next recollection entitled 'I'd Rather Go Blind' ('Ja luchshe oslepnu'): "I also wouldn't have remembered this story if my conclusions hadn't coincided with it."⁵⁶ The narrator's pride in the way that memory now answers to his reasoned command is a reflection of

⁵³ 3:500.

⁵⁴ «Об этих сценах я, вероятно, и не вспомнил бы, если б не подумал о том, о чем думаю теперь, стараясь понять, откуда возникла эта боль, эта радость и сожаление.» 3:593.

⁵⁵ «Это очень давняя история. И я бы не вспомнил о ней. Но выводы, которые я сделал, неожиданно, воскресили эту историю в моей памяти.» 3:636.

⁵⁶ «Эту историю я также не вспомнил бы, если бы мои выводы не совпали с ней.» 3:637.

his claim to have restored rational control over the subconscious elements of his psyche. However, there is surely a danger here of the narrator, so to speak, having his cake and eating it: if the memory is that susceptible to suggestion then it must further call into question the objective validity of the earlier anamnestic section on which the whole interpretative structure of *Before Sunrise* is built. However, characteristically, the narrator still remains oblivious to these transgressions against scientific objectivity.

Escaping Melancholic Selfhood

All this raises the obvious question: what exactly to make of the narrator's conspicuous but unacknowledged failure to live up to his own scientific standards. The question is not insignificant, for whatever the reader takes from *Before Sunrise* will be totally dependent on how he evaluates the outcome of the melancholic autotherapy that is the book's self-proclaimed *raison d'être*. The transgressions against scientific objectivity are altogether too blatant to be simply ignored by the serious reader; yet, by the same token, they have to be reconciled with the spirit of a book which, both explicitly and implicitly, demands that the narrator's autotherapy be taken at face value. The way to move beyond this impasse can perhaps be deduced from an altogether unexpected source: Tsesar' Vol'pe's sensitive analysis of *Youth Restored*. In seeking to understand how the reader should approach the all-important commentary in that work, Vol'pe identified three common modes of reading *Youth Restored*: firstly, where the book is read as a straightforward scientific treatise which, in its failure to attain methodological objectivity, can be rejected as flawed; secondly, where it is read as a straightforward scientific treatise which, despite occasional error, nonetheless makes valid, scientifically credible points; thirdly, where it is read as an

ironic parody of the whole notion of scientific objectivity.⁵⁷ For Vol'pe none of these strategies is completely adequate to understanding the complexities of *Youth Restored*; instead Vol'pe posits an approach which acknowledges that:

The commentary [of *Youth Restored*] is written by Zoshchenko in all seriousness. And although Zoshchenko shows his 'author' to be a slightly naïve philosopher of life, nonetheless Zoshchenko is interested in 'elevating' the author, and not in enabling his discrediting, he is interested in bringing the 'authorial mask' closer to his own authentic writer's voice.⁵⁸

Although written with *Youth Restored* in mind, this observation would seem to be equally perspicacious in relation to *Before Sunrise*. The three common readings that Vol'pe discerns find ready examples amongst critical approaches to *Before Sunrise*.⁵⁹ However, much more importantly, Vol'pe's prescription of a nuanced reading style which acknowledges both the seriousness of the narrative voice and the small degree of distance separating it from the voice of the writer is essential to a

⁵⁷ Ts Vol'pe, *Iskusstvo nepokhozhesti*, pp. 232-235. Vol'pe never had the chance to extend this perceptive understanding of *Youth Restored* to *Before Sunrise*; he was killed whilst trying to escape the Leningrad blockade in winter 1941, almost two years before the latter work appeared. Nonetheless, he was aware of the work on *Before Sunrise* (then under the working title *The Keys of Happiness* (*Kliuchi schast'ia*)) and had been told by the author of its connection with *Youth Restored* (see p. 315 of the same source). Thus it is perhaps not excessively inappropriate to apply some of his insights into the early book onto the later one as well.

⁵⁸ «Комментарий написан Зошенко с полной серьезностью. И хотя Зошенко показывает своего 'автора' несколько наивным философом жизни, но Зошенко заинтересован в том, чтобы 'поднять' автора, а не способствовать его дискредитации, заинтересован в том, чтобы приблизить 'авторскую маску' к подлинному писательскому голосу.» Ts Vol'pe, *Ibid.*, p. 235.

⁵⁹ Gregory Carleton would be an example of the first type: he interprets the transgressions of objective method as an indication of a failed attempt to secure definite knowledge of the self (see G Carleton, *The Politics of Reception*, pp. 146-160). The second type of reader is reflected in those psychoanalytically or autobiographically orientated approaches to *Before Sunrise* which seek to understand the book as a simple transcription of Zoshchenko's own autotherapy (Examples include V von Wiren, 'Zoshchenko's Psychological Interests', *Slavic and East European Journal*, 11 (1967), 1, pp.3-22; I Masing-Delic, 'Biology, Reason and Literature', pp. 77-101; T P Hodge, 'Freudian Elements in Zoshchenko's *Pered voskhodom solntsa* (1943)', *Slavonic and East European Review*, 67 (1989), 1: 1-28. See also Krista Hansen's autobiographical readings of the work: 'Kto vinovat? Guilt and Rebellion in Zoshchenko's Accounts of Childhood', D Rancour-Laferriere (ed), *Russian Literature and Psychoanalysis* (Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1989), pp. 285-302; 'Autobiography and Conversion: Zoshchenko's *Before Sunrise*', J G Harris (ed), *Autobiographical Statements in Twentieth-Century Russian Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp.133-153.) An example of the third type is Rachel May who advances an interpretation of *Before Sunrise* as an ironic exercise exploring themes of censorship, both public and private (See R May, 'Superego as literary Subtext: Story and Structure in Mikhail Zoshchenko's *Before Sunrise*', *Slavic Review*, 55 (1996), 1, pp. 106-124).

proper understanding of the lonely melancholic narrator of *Before Sunrise*. A “slightly naïve philosopher of life” describes him perfectly, his naivety telling principally in his complete unawareness of the scientific limitations of his self-styled, scientific autotherapy. Importantly, the constructive and interpretative efforts which erode the objectivity of the narrator’s autotherapy are made fairly obvious for the reader; the effect of this is to posit a degree of distance between the naïve narrator and the writer. To be sure, the narrator of *Before Sunrise* is brought much closer to the “authentic writer’s voice” than in *Youth Restored* (or indeed any other fictional work of Zoshchenko’s for that matter); narrator and writer share both name and biography, but they are still not perfectly synchronized: if they were, the narrator could not be *portrayed* as naïve. It is important to note, as Vol’pe does, that this intimation of naivety in the narrator’s voice does not function to ridicule or demean him; in *Before Sunrise* it has the more subtle purpose of allowing the reader to see all the unscientific obfuscation behind the narrator’s technique, without the narrator himself having to lose faith in it. In this lies a crucial point: no matter how much the reader may doubt the scientific claims of the therapy, the narrator is always utterly convinced by it. This underscores an important aspect of the therapy: it aims primarily at the creation of *subjective* meaning; thus, its efficaciousness will only ever be relevant in equally *subjective* terms. In a very real sense it does not matter whether the technique is scientific or not; it does not matter whether it convinces others through its objective correctness; if it drives the narrator’s private melancholic torments into abeyance then it has worked on its own terms and has achieved something of no little importance.

The subjectivism of this process breaks out into the open at the point of ‘cure’. The mock-objectivity of dream analysis and anamnesis quickly coalesces into the description of the final confrontation with unreason as, quite literally, mortal combat

at close quarters. As the narrator closes in on the subconscious basis of his neurosis, he is struck by terror:

This terror held me tenaciously in its embrace; and it did not leave me right away. It gripped me all the stronger the further I pushed into that startling world, the laws of which I was for so long unable to understand.⁶⁰

Completely gone now is the language of science, to be replaced by a heightened rhetoric of pitched struggle. As he pushes further into his subconscious, the narrator is confronted by a horrifying vision:

The light of my reason lit up horrific slums, where terrors lurked, where barbaric forces found a refuge for themselves, those forces which had so darkened my life.⁶¹

Those barbaric forces recall the references to the philosophy of Fascism as "a return to barbarianism" ("*vozvrat k varvarstvu*");⁶² thus the struggle against subconscious forces is again equated with the epic national struggle against the Nazi horde. This association is reinforced by the narrator's adoption of military terminology to describe the course of the struggle: "These forces didn't pull back when I came right up to them. They took up the fight; but this fight was already unequal."⁶³ The rhetoric of battle continues as the narrator begins to prevail in his struggle with his subconscious self: "my consciousness controlled his [the unconscious opponent's] activity. Already

⁶⁰ «Этот страх цепко держал меня в своих объятьях. И он не сразу оставил меня. Он сжимал меня тем сильнее, чем глубже я проникал в тот поразительный мир, законы которого я так долго не мог понять.» 3:625.

⁶¹ «Свет моего разума осветил ужасные трущобы, где таились страхи, где находили себе пристанище варварские силы, столь омрачавшие мою жизнь.» 3:625.

⁶² See for example 3:574.

⁶³ «Эти силы не отступали, когда я вплотную подошел к ним. Они приняли бой. Но этот бой был уже неравный.» 3:626.

with ease. I parried his strikes. Already with a smile, I met his resistance.”⁶⁴ It even holds until the end, when, having grown weak, “the enemy ran.”⁶⁵

In the end, the cure turns out to consist in subjecting the subconscious psyche to the dictates of reason. This is something that the narrator suggests with a series of rhetorical questions once the battle is done and the cure has apparently been effected:

However, where exactly did the cure come from? Which mechanisms were repaired? Why did age-old terrors bid farewell to my person?

They bid me farewell only because the light of my reason illuminated the illogicality of their existence.⁶⁶

However, the rather vague invocation of “reason” really raises more questions than it answers. In fact, despite reason being evoked constantly throughout the remainder of *Before Sunrise* and being elevated into the guiding motif of the latter half of the book, the reader is never offered a conveniently explicit definition of exactly what the narrator means by reason. The vagueness surrounding such a prominent term can only function to invite readers to reflect on what might be meant by reason for themselves. It is important to note in this regard, that the reference in the passage just quoted is to “my reason”; it does not refer simply to “reason” in the abstract. Thus, the appeal here is definitively not to some kind of abstract rationalism, much less to some kind of Hegelian universal spirit. The healing reason that the narrator credits for his cure is something rooted in the self; it is above all an attitude of subjective orientation in the world.

⁶⁴ «[М]ое сознание контролировало его действия. Уже с легкостью я парировал его удары. Уже с улыбкой я встречал его сопротивление.» 3:626.

⁶⁵ «Враг бежал.» 3:626.

⁶⁶ «Однако отчего же пришло излечение? Какие механизмы были исправлены? Почему давние страхи простились с моей особой? / Они простились со мной только лишь потому, что свет моего разума осветил нелогичность их существования.» 3:627.

In fact, as the continuation of the passage cited above reveals, reason for the narrator is more accurately a subjective orientation *towards* the world: adopting the Pavlovian-sounding jargon that he has made his own, the narrator explains:

These terrors were tied up with those objects, which were not dangerous in the way that the infant perceived.

To sever this conditional, erroneous, illogical connection – that was the task.

I severed these connections. I separated the genuine unfortunate events from the conditional objects of fear [those “painful objects”]. I invested these objects of fear with their true meaning. And this constituted the cure. The absence of logic was cured by logic.⁶⁷

When the patina of Pavlovian terminology is rubbed away from this passage, the reader is confronted with a kind of subjectively-willed psychological reorientation in the world that has absolutely no basis in the Pavlovian theory of the mind. In fact, more than Pavlov, this sense of the reevaluation of the individual psychological relation to external reality recalls that Aurelian stoicism advanced earlier in *Youth Restored*. For the narrator of *Before Sunrise*, reason would seem to reside primarily in the exposure of internal psychic realities to the external world and their subsequent re-appraisal in the light of the encounter. Interestingly, in this he approaches (although almost certainly without knowing it) the Kleinian notions of integration and mourning as psychological strategies for containing the depressive position. It will be remembered that, for Klein, a degree of influence could be exercised over the inscrutable, destructive forces raging inside the psyche through the appeal to objects in the external world on which introjected psychic objects were based. By appealing to the objective prototypes of internal objects in the external world, internal psychic

⁶⁷ «Эти страхи были увязаны с теми объектами, кои не были опасны в той мере, как это воспринял младенец. / Разорвать эту условную, неверную связь – вот в чем была задача. / Я разорвал эти связи. Разъединил подлинные беды от условных объектов устрашения. Придал этим объектам устрашения их истинное значение. И в этом и заключалось излечение. Отсутствие логики лечилось логикой.» 3:628.

realities could be rendered, to a degree at least, amenable to integration into the world beyond the self. Thus, for Klein, as for the narrator of *Before Sunrise*, the 'rational' is constituted by the rooting of selfhood in the world beyond the hermetic circularity and interminable self-reflection of melancholic subjectivity.

This sense of finding some purchase over an otherwise unknowable inner psychic reality in the world beyond the subject is a key element of the cure described in *Before Sunrise*. Thus, just before the moment of cure, the narrator notes:

Before I would suffer defeat in the dark, not knowing with whom I was fighting, not understanding how I must fight. But now, when the sun had thrown light on our duel, I saw the pitiful, barbaric face of my enemy. I saw his naïve ruses, I heard his war-like cries, which so terrified me before. But now, when I had learnt the language of the enemy, these cries stopped frightening me.⁶⁸

This idea of throwing sunlight into the dark recesses of the subconscious is a theme that runs right through *Before Sunrise*. The sunlit duel is a telling metaphor in this regard: the duel, traditionally conducted in the half-light of dawn to make the individual duelists harder to discern, is now opened up to the full light of day with the result that the absurdity of the struggle is made manifest. Thus, it is the appeal to external reality that constitutes the redemptive light of reason for the narrator; it is this turning outward which enables incompatible psychic realities to be confronted and tamed, perhaps even to be overcome.

The dueling metaphor above illuminates another important aspect of the reason invoked by the narrator of *Before Sunrise*: its definition is wholly dependent on an acknowledgement, albeit implicit, of the existence of unreason. In the same way as light is meaningless without darkness, so it is only in contrast with the earlier

⁶⁸ «Я раньше терпел поражения в темноте, не зная, с кем я борюсь, не понимая, как я должен бороться. Но теперь, когда солнце осветило место поединка, я увидел жалкую и варварскую морду моего врага. Я увидел наивные его уловки. Я услышал воинственные его крики, которые меня так устрашали раньше. Но теперь, когда я научился языку врага, эти крики перестали меня страшить.» 3:626.

dueling in the dark that the transfiguring light of reason in this metaphor has any obvious meaning. Thus, paradoxically enough, reaching an understanding of the nature of human reason relies precisely on reaching a similar understanding of the nature of human irrationality: those “naïve ruses” and that “language of the enemy”. The implication of this is that reason, however ambitious the narrator’s claims for it may be, can never absolutely supplant the irrational without in turn supplanting itself. This non-metaphysical understanding of human reason means that the cure which the narrator claims for himself must, by necessity, be provisional. In fact this is something that the narrator himself hints at heavily at several places in *Before Sunrise*. Shortly after the cure has been effected he notes of the neural reflex which structured his pathological associations:

I cannot say that this reflex has disappeared completely. Some symptoms of a mechanical order remain. But logic has rendered them completely harmless – they have stopped being accompanied by terror. And on the strength of this they have gradually begun to fade.⁶⁹

The symptoms have thus been tamed perhaps, but definitely not abolished. However, perhaps the most important statement of the provisional nature of the cure comes at the end of the novel, just before the afterword; here the narrator asserts: “It won’t do for the lowest forces to gain the upper hand. Reason must keep on winning.”⁷⁰ The reason for this rather gratuitous translation is to emphasize the fact that the “winning” referred to is imperfective: *pobezhdai'* rather than *pobedit'*. The significance of the imperfective here becomes clearer when contrasted with the ending of Evgenii Zamiatin’s novel *We* (*My*, 1921) whose final line *Before Sunrise* recalls. Victor Erlich, who noted the coincidence, contrasts the two lines in terms of the obvious

⁶⁹ «Я не могу сказать, что этот рефлекс исчез полностью. Некоторые симптомы механического порядка остались. Но логика их полностью обезвредила – они перестали сопровождаться страхом. И в силу этого они стали постепенно угасать.» 3:629.

⁷⁰ «Не дело, чтобы низшие силы одерживали верх. Должен побеждать разум.» 3:691.

irony in Zamiatin's example;⁷¹ however, just as important is the fact that Zamiatin's line is perfective to *Before Sunrise*'s imperfective: "reason must win in the end."⁷² The Zoshchenko narrator's imperfective line suggests an iterative struggle in which reason must prevail again and again. Just like Melanie Klein's, Zoshchenko's understanding of the psyche eschews fixity, viewing the rational ego as a life's work undertaken under the auspices of an open future.

This interdependence of reason and unreason is reflected in the interdependence of the two halves of *Before Sunrise*: the 'rational' half would not make sense without its 'irrational' foundation; the aesthetic attributes of the 'irrational' foundation require the 'rational' half to achieve a sense of philosophical completion. In fact, of the two, it is only the 'irrational' part that is aesthetically self-sufficient; this fact does not escape the narrator who anticipates readers, on encountering the 'rational' half of *Before Sunrise*, begging him "to write in the way he began."⁷³ He explains that: "With the greatest of pleasure I would have fulfilled this legitimate demand; however, the theme does not allow this to be done."⁷⁴ The theme being the deliverance from the subconscious irrationality elaborated in the first half of the book, the narrator's response would seem to make sense; however, the importance of unreason to the whole undertaking and the need to find a means of representing it remains.

⁷¹ V Erlich, *Modernism and Revolution: Russian Literature in Transition* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p.177. Erlich notes of the coincidence that "there is no reason to assume that Zoshchenko was deliberately echoing Zamyatin"; indeed *We* was branded anti-Soviet on completion and remained unpublished in the USSR until 1988, so there can be little likelihood that Zoshchenko encountered the work legitimately. However, it should be noted that Zamiatin was one of Zoshchenko's teachers at the Petrograd House of Arts in 1921 when he was revising *We*: it is perhaps not beyond the bounds of possibility that Zoshchenko encountered the book, or parts thereof, either in manuscript form or through readings. Ultimately, all this must remain speculative; however, the closeness of the citation, in terms of phraseology, theme and textual position, remains striking in the extreme.

⁷² «[P]азум должен победить.» E Zamiatin, *Мы* in *Izbrannye proizvedeniia* (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1990), p. 154.

⁷³ «[...] писать так, как он начал.» 3:642.

⁷⁴ «С превеликим удовольствием я исполнил бы это законное требование. Однако тема не допускает этого сделать.» 3:642.

It is interesting in this regard that the dueling in the dark passage quoted above alludes to the discovery of “the language of the [irrational] enemy” that lurks in the unconscious. If the narrator found the language of conquering reason in his idiosyncratic, Soviet-sounding, Pavlovian voluntarism, then it is of no small importance that this is complemented by a language of vanquished unreason worked out mainly from the literature of Russian Symbolism. This tells particularly in chapter headings containing the parts of the book dealing with the unconscious: the recalled vignettes are mostly collected in the chapters entitled ‘Fallen Leaves’ and ‘A Terrible World’ (‘Strashnyi mir’); as suggested already, the first is an allusion to a work by Vasilii Rozanov, but the second is also a Silver Age allusion, evoking a poetic cycle of this name by Aleksandr Blok (1909-1916). This cycle includes the poems that make up ‘Dances Macabre’ (‘Pliaski smerti’, 1912-14), one of the poems of which also provides a title for the chapter in *Before Sunrise* in which the narrator analyses his dreams of water: ‘Dark Water’ (‘Chernaia voda’). In fact, the opening stanza of this poem is quoted in full in *Before Sunrise*:

Ancient, ancient dream. From the gloom
Street lamps are running – but where to?
Over there is only dark water,
Over there is only endless void.⁷⁵

The poem actually plays a definitive part in fixing the meaning of the water motif that torments the narrator through his dreams. Noting early in the chapter a dream characterized by “turbid, almost black water” (“*mutnaia, pochti chernaia voda*”), the narrator immediately remembers the stanza just quoted and comes to the conclusion that: “I was running from dark water, from an ‘endless void’.”⁷⁶ The closeness of the

⁷⁵ «Старый, старый сон. Из мрака | Фонари бегут – куда? | Там – лишь черная вода, | Там – лишь забвенье навсегда.» А Blok, ‘Pliaski smerti’ in *Stikhorvoreniiia* (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1955), p. 358 [pp. 356-363]. For citation in *Before Sunrise* see 3:578.

⁷⁶ «Я бежал от черной воды, от ‘забвения навсегда’.» 3:578.

fit between the dream and the poem makes the poetry seem almost subcutaneous, part of the narrator's unconscious, perhaps even the language of that unconscious.

The reader is thus little surprised to learn that with the cure comes a rejection of this Silver Age-inflected language of unconscious dream and memory. This rejection is absolutely not a judgment on the quality of the poetry: the narrator describes the "outstanding verses, outstanding poetry" ("*otlichnye stikhi, otlichnaia poeziia*") of his youth;⁷⁷ Briusov is described as "not a bad poet at all" ("*ochen' neplokhoi poet*");⁷⁸ Blok is praised to the hilt: "Blok, like a focal point, united in himself all the sentiments of his time. But he was a genius. With his genius, he ennobled everything that he thought and wrote about."⁷⁹ What the narrator claims to take issue with is a kind of pervasive cult of melancholia that he finds in the works. Talking of Briusov, the narrator asserts, without a hint of irony:

But how unbalanced he was! What melancholia overcame him from time to time! What hysterical notes can be heard in his music, in his thoughts! What a catastrophe resides in his heart!⁸⁰

However, there is perhaps a sense in which the narrator is castigating himself as much, if not more, than Briusov: one feels that the narrator's impassioned rejection of poetry so obviously ingrained in his soul has a great deal to do with the rejection of a part of himself for which that poetry stands. He twice refers to it as poetry "of my time" ("*moego vremeni*"); moreover, he remains deeply affected by it: "I won't hide it from you – tears appeared in my eyes when I suddenly recalled these forgotten

⁷⁷ 3:599.

⁷⁸ 3:600.

⁷⁹ «Блок, как в фокусе, соединил в себе все чувства своего времени. Но он был гений. Он облагородил своим гением все, о чем он думал, писал.» 3:600.

⁸⁰ «Но какой он неровный! Какая меланхолия одолевает его по временам! Какие истерические нотки слышатся в его музыке, в его мыслях! Какая катастрофа присутствует в его сердце!» 3:600.

sounds.”⁸¹ But, perhaps most revealing in all this is the narrator’s admission that: “I was crying for that sad poetry which was akin to me.”⁸²

If the intertextual echoes of the Silver Age are invoked to be rejected as part of the rejection of an irrational selfhood, divorced from reality, then it is interesting to note that the rational selfhood advanced in its place is marked by its own intertextual allusions. Perhaps most interesting among these is Tolstoy’s *A Confession (Ispoved’)*. The ‘rational’ discussion of the achievements, exploits and potentials of human reason covers three chapters, the headings of which are ‘Reason Conquers Death’ (‘Razum pobezhdaet smert’), ‘Reason Conquers Suffering’ (‘Razum pobezhdaet stradaniia’) and ‘Reason Conquers Old-Age’ (‘Razum pobezhdaet starost’). These same three human inevitabilities lie at the heart of Tolstoy’s spiritual and existential crisis in *A Confession*; he is prevented from participation in life because: “I knew that there was old age, suffering and death.”⁸³ The outcome of Tolstoy’s crisis was a realization of the faith needed to stabilize rational meaning; the citation of him in a section concerned overwhelmingly with human reason has the function of enlisting precisely this aspect of *A Confession*. However, it is not Tolstoy’s Christian convictions that are invoked, rather it is the notion of belief in a purely psychological sense: conviction as a precondition of rational thought. It is interesting in this regard to note that the narrator of *Before Sunrise* reverses the order of Tolstoy’s depressing litany of existential limitations: Tolstoy’s builds from old age to death; the narrator’s the other way around. The inversion implies a sense in which Tolstoy’s schema has been turned on its head: the most obvious way being that *A Confession* is a personal work which

⁸¹ «Не скрою от вас – у меня появилась слезы на глазах, когда я вдруг припомнил эти позабытые звуки.» 3:599.

⁸² «[Я] оплакиваю ту печальную поэзию, которая была мне сродни.» 3:599.

⁸³ «[З]нал, что есть старость, страдания, смерть.» L Tolstoi, *Ispoved’*, p.28..

gives rise to a prescriptive philosophy of life; the narrator by contrast aims to reach a personal truth from that same prescriptive Tolstoyan philosophy.

To some degree at least, the reader had been primed to look out for these Tolstoyan echoes back in the prologue: in the dialogue with the physiologist, Speranskii suggests the similarity of *Before Sunrise* to “Tolstoy’s philosophy”, which “was useful only to him and no-one else.”⁸⁴ To this, the narrator replies:

Tolstoy’s philosophy was a religion, not a science. This was a faith which helped him. I am already far from religion. I am talking not about faith and not about a philosophical system. I am talking about iron formulas, tested by a great scientist.⁸⁵

On the face of it, this passage repudiates any concern with faith; but it is artfully contradicted by the intertextual allusions to *A Confession* that appear towards the end of the book. The only way in which these two features of the text can be reconciled (and, to be sure, they do demand to be reconciled) is by separating religious faith from belief in a broader, psychological and epistemological sense: the Russian *vera*, like the English faith or belief, supports both meanings. If the passage above is re-read in this way, it can be understood to repudiate only religious belief (“I am already far from religion”) rather than faith as an epistemological category. This distinction is crucial, because the narrower opposition between science and religious belief leaves a small, no doubt heretical, space for personal faith in a scientific worldview: faith in the validity, reach and progress of scientific knowledge. It is precisely this faith in science that the narrator of *Before Sunrise* draws on for his cure; it is precisely this faith in science that underlies the scientific pretences of his less than scientific cure.

⁸⁴ «Философия Толстого [...] была полезна только ему и никому больше.» 3:452.

⁸⁵ «Философия Толстого была религия, а не наука. Это была вера, которая ему помогла. Я же далек от религии. Я говорю не о вере и не о философской системе. Я говорю о железных формулах, проверенных великим ученым.» 3:452.

It is telling that the narrator's invocation of 'scientific' faith is never directly voiced. Like those melancholic textual truanancies that punctuate his comic fiction, the call to faith in *Before Sunrise* resides in the gaps: in the scientific inadequacy of the narrator's 'scientific' cure; in the obliquity of intertextuality; and, perhaps the biggest gap of all, the almost seventeen year autobiographical lacuna that separates the last recollection and the time of the book's publication. The narrator explains that the autobiography stops at this point because "from the age of thirty" the narrator, having effected his cure, "became a completely different person".⁸⁶ However, we only have his word for this, and the reader cannot entirely escape the suspicion that the narrator's silence from this point on is required, as much as anything else, in order not to shake his faith in his own cure. Indeed, surely even the most hard-bitten, scientific reader would not begrudge him this, for, as the first half of *Before Sunrise* shows, beyond his 'cure' all that awaits the narrator is the dead beauty of his own melancholic underground.

The threatening shadow of Dostoevsky's underground man, with his deformed, self-lacerating consciousness, stands over the whole of *Before Sunrise*: Zoshchenko's book adopts a looser, but still comparable bipartite structure to Dostoevsky's tale; it replicates a similar generational divide between a youth characterised by romantic idealism and a maturity characterised by utilitarian positivism; both books share a concern with the unreason at the heart of human rationality; both books extol the need for individuals to create subjective meaning in life; both books also share the same oppressive narratorial loneliness. There is even room in the intertextual echo chamber that is *Before Sunrise* for a direct quote from *Notes from Underground* (*Zapiski iz podpol'ia*, 1864). Dostoevsky is cited as an

⁸⁶ «С тридцати лет я стал совсем другим человеком»; 3:452.

example of a writer whose mental ill health distorted his artistic vision; the narrator misquotes a line from *Notes from Underground* in support of his claim: “too lofty a consciousness, and even any consciousness is a disease”⁸⁷ Yet the citation is naively self-defeating: it misreads a line spoken by a character as pure authorial speech in replication of an error Zoshchenko had had to endure on occasion with regard to his own writings. In fact, the real effect of this citation is to prompt reflection on the similarities between *Before Sunrise* and *Notes from Underground*, something perhaps confirmed by the narrator’s observation straight after his discussion of Dostoevsky that: “Perhaps, in this book of mine someone will see an error similar to the one that I am now talking about.”⁸⁸

A Cure for Whose Ills?

In the dialogue with the physiologist which is included in the prologue, the narrator agrees to an injunction made by Speranskii against generalizing from his experience and making promises to his readers as regards a cure.⁸⁹ Indeed he reminds himself of this promise punctiliously throughout *Before Sunrise*. Echoing a similar line in *Youth Restored*, he tells the reader that: “This is not a book of home cures”⁹⁰ Moreover, he also makes two formal warnings to the reader which are tantamount to the injunction: ‘don’t try this at home.’⁹¹ However, there are times when the narrator chafes against his promise. After the cure has been effected, the narrator is clearly desperate to

⁸⁷ «Слишком высокое сознание и даже всякое сознание – болезнь.» 3:662. This is actually a conflation of two nearby lines from early in the novel, firstly: “All the same, I am strongly convinced that, not only a great deal of consciousness, but also even any consciousness is a disease” («Но все-таки я крепко убежден, что не только очень много сознания, но даже и всякое сознание болезнь»). But also: “[...] to think too much is a disease, a real, full-blown disease.” («... слишком сознаять – это болезнь, настоящая, полная болезнь.» F M Dostoevskii, *Zapiski iz podpol'ia* in *Sobranie sochinenii v desiaty tomakh* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1956-58) T4, p.136-137.

⁸⁸ «Быть может, и в этой моей книге кто-либо усмотрит ошибку, подобную тем, о которых я сейчас говорю.» 3:622.

⁸⁹ 3:452.

⁹⁰ «Эта книга не лечебник.» 3:628.

⁹¹ 3:606 and 3:689.

generalise from his experience; reminding himself of his promise to the physiologist.

the narrator retorts:

That's as may be! I am only talking about my life, about my days of sadness and about days of deliverance.

I am not going beyond the bounds of my illness, which I managed to get rid of.

No doubt, however, people, having my characteristics and my sensitive psyche, can endure similar calamities. And here, I fancy, it is possible to make some generalisation – within the bounds of those illnesses that are generalized under the name 'psychoneurosis'.⁹²

In this passage, there is a certain recalcitrance about his promise to the physiologist: the narrator cannot help dropping in that not only was it "*my* illness", but that "*I* managed to get rid" of it as well, reinforcing the extra-medical aspect of his cure: the "generalized under the name 'psychoneurosis'" is also quite sly, gently reinforcing the medical profession's own reliance on generalized symptomatology.

In view of this it is worth looking at those warnings a little closer. The first warning is made during the period of dream analysis and occurs in the form of a footnote related to a resurgence of melancholic symptoms during the autoanalysis. It reads:

Let this [relapsed] state of mine warn the reader off similar experiments. One can investigate the psyche and analyze dreams only under a doctor's observation. This kind of self-treatment led to difficult consequences for me. And only a professional ability to think and analyze saved me from still greater misfortune. The reader does not have to follow my example; that is more than dangerous.⁹³

⁹² «Ну что ж! Ведь я говорю только лишь о своей жизни, о своих печальных днях и о днях освобождения. / Я не выхожу за пределы моей болезни, которую мне удалось убрать. / Однако нет сомнения, люди, имеющие мои свойства, мою чистительную психику, могут терпеть подобные же бедствия. И тут, мне думается, можно сделать некоторое обобщение – в пределах тех болезней, которые обобщаются названием 'психоневроз'.» 3:629.

⁹³ «Пусть это мое состояние остережет читателя от подобных опытов. Только под наблюдением врача можно производить исследование психики и анализировать сны. Такое самолечение привело меня к тяжелым прследствиям. И только лишь профессиональное умение думать и анализировать спасло меня от еще большей беды. Читатель не должен следовать моему примеру. Это более чем опасно.» 3:606.

However, as so often with Zoshchenko, this is not nearly as unambiguous as it seems at first glance. It is worth noting that there is a distance implicit in the articulation as a footnote: *Before Sunrise* does not rely on a system of referencing in the way *Youth Restored* did and footnotes are comparably few and far between. In fact every sentence of the warning seems to suggest its own implicit qualification. Firstly, the threat of melancholic breakdown will warn off only those who are not already in the grip of depression; for those who are the warning is essentially meaningless. Secondly, the recommendation to seek medical assistance with dream interpretation and psychological analysis is belied by the fact that the narrator's autotherapy was premised precisely on his failure to find a medical cure. In fact, this particular line is really more provocative than sincere, especially given the scepticism of the contemporary Soviet medical establishment to precisely these non-scientific and non-medicalized approaches. Thirdly, anyone ready to cede the core existential skills of thinking and analyzing to professionals is arguably beyond cure, and would do well both to heed this warning and, probably stop reading Zoshchenko as well. Finally, that the example of the narrator should not be aped is implicit in the nature of the cure which the narrator claims for himself: it is a *subjective* reorientation towards external reality; it is learning the language of *own's own* unconscious. It is worth noting that the effect of the last line is more to enjoin the reader to find their own cure than it is a proscription of doing the same as the narrator: the reader "*does not have to*" ("*ne dolzhen*") heed the narrator's example, he is not told not to ("*dolzhen ne*").

Virtually the same warning is repeated in the epilogue with the same ironic reference to professional capacities for thought and medical supervision.⁹⁴ However, for all his punctilious reiteration of it, the narrator does actually break his promise to

⁹⁴ 3:689.

Speranskii in *Before Sunrise*. Reflecting on his reasons for writing the book, the narrator insists that: "I am writing it with the hope that it will be useful to people."⁹⁵ Remembering his undertaking to Speranskii not to promise anything to readers, he decides to go ahead anyway:

But I am promising to a moderate degree.

To some, perhaps, my book will bring respite, amusement. To others it will return mental balance. A third group it will anger, and force to think things over. It will force them to come down from Olympus to listen to the pronouncements of an ignoramus to whom happened something that only happens to dogs.⁹⁶

As in *Youth Restored*, there is the same acknowledgement of readers seeking entertainment and distraction, although where they might find that in a demanding book like *Before Sunrise* is not indicated. There is also an explicit acknowledgement that the book is intended to help those in states of mental distress and alienation. This has been implicit throughout *Before Sunrise* and is articulated with some clarity in the discussion of suffering towards the end of the book. Noting that science had already found the "keys" to ameliorating many sufferings, the narrator suggests:

However, keys have still not been properly fitted to those complex, intimate mechanisms which arise in the depths of our psyche and which act on us, as we have seen, to such an inordinate degree.

Not without timidity I tried to fit these keys. That's as may be, if people say that these keys don't fit their, perhaps, sophisticated mechanisms, then I'll reconcile myself to this, I'll go away like a locksmith, who picked at the lock for a bit, but didn't open it because of his under-qualification or by reason of evening drinking.

⁹⁵ «Я пишу ее с надеждой, что она будет полезна людям.» 3:641.

⁹⁶ «Но я обещаю в умеренной степени. / Одним, быть может, книга моя доставит отдых, развлечение. Другим вернет душевное равновесие. Третьих рассердит, заставит задуматься, заставит сойти с Олимпа, чтоб послушать, что произносит неуч, с которым случилось нечто такое, что случается только с собаками.» 3:641.

In general – I don't know how it is for other doors, but for my door the keys fit.⁹⁷

This is precisely the kernel of the therapeutic gesture that the narrator makes: he offers up his experience to anyone it may help. Central to his outlook is a respect for the subjectivity of illness and suffering, and a good-natured willingness to accept the limits of his insight. Indeed, one feels that, even if the narrator's experience does not prove directly useful, then, to extend his own metaphor, it at least gets those locked out thinking about keys and locksmiths rather than languishing in vulnerability on the stairwell. It is interesting that the passage opens with an assertion (polite and in the passive voice, but an assertion nonetheless) of a space beyond universal medical and scientific knowledge. In fact, the image of the half-trained, drink-befuddled locksmith is arresting and stands in stark contrast to the professional thinkers and analyzers invoked in the warnings, and the detached Olympians referred to in the passage quoted earlier.

It is perhaps at this point that one begins to realize who those distant Olympians are, or at least who some of them are. Perhaps the most obvious candidates are those god-like Pavlovian mind-doctors whose cold neurological perspective clouds out all other discourses of mental being-in-the-world. In this respect, it is not insignificant that they are invited to listen to the experiences of a dog: dogs were, of course, the species of choice for Pavlov's various experiments. In a similar vein, back in the prologue, the narrator had described the role of literature in medicine as akin to having "a conversation with a dog", thus implying the need to represent the patient-

⁹⁷ «Однако еще не полностью подобраны ключи к тем сложным интимным механизмам, какие возникают в глубине нашей психики и действуют на нас, как мы видели, в столь непомерной степени. / Не без робости я попробовал подобрать эти ключи. Ну что ж, если люди скажут, что эти ключи не подходят к их, быть может, изощренным механизмам, то я и примирюсь на этом, уйду, как слесарь, который, поковыряв замок, так и не открыл его в силу своей малой квалификации или по причине вчерашней выпивки. / В общем, не знаю, как для других дверей, а для моих дверей ключи подходят.» 3:673-674.

eye view in the medical encounter.⁹⁸ In fact, for readers who could cast their minds back to *Youth Restored*, it might even be remembered that the author-figure in this work had described himself as “the dog on which” he “performed all the experiments.” Thus the mind-doctors are being enjoined to listen to their patients, to take the occasional view from the experimental cage, and possibly even to learn something from Zoshchenko’s bungling, but good-natured locksmith of the soul. It is interesting that, when viewed in this way, the narrator’s adoption of the Pavlovian language of reflexes for his own ‘canine’ needs actually acquires quite a sharp satirical edge; although easy enough to miss the first time round, this satirical underside can still cut the heart out of all the obsequious praise of the Pavlovian genius that is everywhere in *Before Sunrise*.⁹⁹

There are, however, higher gods on the Soviet Olympus and the reference to Pavlovian neurologists is sufficiently oblique to allow the metaphor to embrace other referents. It is, perhaps, at this point that one might recall the unconvincing association of the narrator’s mental travails and the national struggle with Fascism. There is something slightly ‘bolted-on’ about this strand of *Before Sunrise*, but it is a constant presence throughout the book and demands to be taken seriously. It emerges at several points in *Before Sunrise*, but perhaps most significantly in the passage immediately preceding the one challenging Olympians to come down from the mountain. Restating the question of timeliness, the narrator asks himself:

What drives me to write this book? Why in the grave and menacing days of war am I mumbling on about my own and others’ indispositions from days gone by?

⁹⁸ «[P]азговор с собакой»; 3:451.

⁹⁹ For an example of the latter see the prologue where Pavlov is credited with any and all utility that resulted from the narrator’s method; asked by Speranskii whether his method was Freudian, the narrator answers: “Absolutely not. It was Pavlov. I made use of his principle. It was his idea.” («Вовсе нет. Это был Павлов. Я пользовался его принципом. Это была его идея.») 3:452.

Why speak of wounds not sustained on the field of battle?

Perhaps this is a post-war book? Perhaps it is destined for people who, once the war is finished, will be in need of similar psycho-therapeutic reading?¹⁰⁰

This perhaps would not have been an unrealistic ambition, for, as Anna Krylova has shown, by 1944 (the year after the first half of *Before Sunrise* appeared and was promptly banned) Soviet writers were beginning to interpret their ideological mission as ‘engineers of human souls’ in terms of a mandate for concerning themselves with the post-war rehabilitation of war invalids, including those psychologically scarred by the fighting.¹⁰¹ However, there is no guarantee that *Before Sunrise* would have fared any better the following year: as Krylova shows the topic remained politically contentious in reflection of “the Soviet leadership’s deep anxiety over the psychological state of post-war Soviet society.”¹⁰² However, we will never really know what might have been because the narrator decides that the time for the book is now and re-rehearses the by now familiar argument about the book striking a blow against Fascist irrationalism in the name of human reason.

If the narrator’s confronting and overcoming of his own unreason is to have any significance in the national struggle against Nazism, it would depend on the war against Germany being construed as a comparable struggle between Soviet reason and Nazi unreason. This reading of the narrator’s struggle in the context of the national struggle is the kernel of the propagandistic point that the narrator claims for *Before*

¹⁰⁰ «Что заставляет меня писать эту книгу? Почему в тяжкие и грозные дни войны я бормочу о своих и чужих недомоганиях, случившихся во время оно? / Зачем говорить о ранах, полученных не на полях сражений? / Может быть, это послевоенная книга? И она предназначена людям, кои, закончив войну, будут нуждаться в подобном душевспасительном чтении?» 3:640.

¹⁰¹ A Krylova, “‘Healers of Wounded Souls’: The Crisis of Private Life in Soviet Literature, 1944-1946”, *The Journal of Modern History*, 73:2 (Jun 2001), p. 314.

¹⁰² Ibid, p. 316. In fact, as Krylova discusses, those works which succeeded in exploring the theme of psychologically scarred war veterans, such as the Stalin Prize-winning *Simply Love* (*Prosto Liubov'*, 1944) by Vanda Vasilevskaia, were those that relied on more or less time-honoured means of squaring the ideological circle – in this case the redemptive love of a female non-combatant, with a concomitant silence about female war trauma. See pp. 325-331 of the same source.

Sunrise in as much as it posits the Soviet Union as the bastion of humanistic reason holding back the tide of barbaric irrationality. However, this positing of the narrator as a microcosmic instance of an international confrontation between forces of reason and irrationality is not at all easy to contain within this simple propagandistic schema. This is because the narrator's conquest of unreason in the here and now was dependent on his rooting out of irrational forces within his own psychic history: it is the irrational prevalence of infantile obsessions without a grounding in mature, contemporary reality that constitutes the heart of the narrator's neurotic unreason; it is also the ruthless exposure of these sources of unreason to the demands of that same contemporary reality and the consequent 'forgetting' of the irrational significance which marks the prevalence of reason. The problem, from the point of view of a propagandistic reading, is that if one then inverts the metaphoric association and reads back from the narrator's struggle with unreason to the Soviet one, then one is left with the clear suggestion that the Soviet battle against unreason should ultimately include a confrontation with its own sources of historical irrationality.

To be sure, the narrator leaves the metaphor as a one-way comparison; moreover, the reader is not at all invited to invert it. However, it is surely in the nature of metaphoric parallels that they can be read both ways; the curious and attentive reader, the kind Zoshchenko never ignored in his writing, will surely be unable to resist the temptation. Should it be done, the reader is then led to look for instances in the history of the Soviet Union where infantile obsessions without realistic grounding jeopardised the rational working of party, state and society. This would seem to offer a perfect description, albeit in psychological terminology, of the rampaging political madness of the purges. It should be noted in this regard that *Before Sunrise* is a work whose genesis coincides quite closely with the historical trajectory of the purges

themselves, from their gradual inception in the mid-thirties through the high-point of repressions in 1937-38 to their slowing by the end of the decade. Just as *Youth Restored*, with its concern with over-work and mental exhaustion, carried the imprint of the Soviet culture during the first *piatiletka* and the Great Leap Forward, so *Before Sunrise* is a book marked, scarred even, by the experience of the purge. In this context the painful dissection of pre-revolutionary biographical details and revolutionary credentials that is so prominent in *Before Sunrise* perhaps acquires more sinister historical echoes. But perhaps the most important inflection of all is the way in which the history of the narrator's neurotic complex is so starkly marked by terror (*strakh*); terror is everywhere in *Before Sunrise*: it runs throughout the recalled vignettes, it saturates the dream analyses and it is an aggravating feature of all the relapses that the narrator endures.

This all-pervading terror makes many of the descriptions of his struggle sound particularly ominous when re-read as social allegory. For instance, during the final confrontation with his neurosis the narrator experiences acute melancholic terror:

There is no doubt, this was an extremely severe case of psychoneurosis. The main arteries along which life flowed were hit.

Food and love, water and the punishing hand predetermined the saddest finale. Death was inevitable. Death from hunger, terror and, perhaps, even from thirst. A fear of punishment and a persecution complex could have a place in the finale.

This finale could easily be called mental illness. Meanwhile all this was only a violent response (more precisely, a complex of responses) to the conditional stimuli. Moreover the response was expedient from the point of view of the unconscious animal psyche. The basis of this response was a defensive reflex. The basis of the response was protection from danger, animal terror, infantile terror.

Reason did not control this response. Logic had been destroyed.
And terror acted to a pernicious extent.¹⁰³

When this account is re-read in terms of the Terror it becomes immediately suggestive. The sense in which ordinary life becomes suddenly untenable, the pervasive fear of punishment and paranoid delusion, the threat of personal destruction, all these could equally describe life during this baffling period of institutional madness. The suggestion of inappropriate defensive responses to spectral threats based on infant perceptions seems a particularly convincing explanation of the purge dynamic: that desperate un-masking of non-existent enemies with non-existent affiliations to implausible-sounding organisations whose names (Trotskyite, Menshevik, White Guardist) more often than not evoked threats more salient to the regime's infancy. Even the psychological terminology does not seem entirely inappropriate. Meanwhile, the last paragraph of the passage might well stand as an epigraph to the whole era of the terror.

Read in this way, the parallels asserted between the narrator's and the nation's struggles have less of a propagandistic purpose and function more as an oblique call for reform: they invite a sincere acknowledgement of, and collective moving on from the irrationalities of the past and the re-orientation of the Soviet system towards external reality and an open future. That invitation to distant Olympians might equally apply to party cadres and ultimately to the leadership itself, whose abstract reasoning, in its detachment from life, threatens always to slip into the persecuting, self-

¹⁰³ «Нет сомнения, это был весьма тяжелый случай психоневроза. Задеты были главные артерии, по которым струилась жизнь. / Еда и любовь, вода и карающая рука предопределяли печальнейший финал. Гибель была неизбежна. Гибель от голода, страха и, может быть, даже от жажды. Страх наказания и мания преследования могли иметь место в финале. / Этот финал легко было назвать психической болезнью. Между тем это был всего лишь бурный ответ (верней, комплекс ответов) на условные раздражители. Причем ответ целесообразный с точки зрения бессознательной животной психики. В основе этого ответа лежал оборонный рефлекс. В основе ответа была защита от опасности, страх животного, страх младенца. Разум не контролировал этот ответ. Логика была нарушена. И страх действовал в губительной степени.» 3:625.

lacerating, irrational frenzy of the philosophical underground. Of course, ordinarily there was no room at all for such bold, philosophically-extensive debate in Soviet culture, but the loosening of political controls during the war perhaps made this seem momentarily possible. In a way the narrator was correct, this was a book for its time: it was written for that brief window of opportunity in the middle of the war when the tide had turned definitively at the front, people had begun to return from evacuation and there was a growing sense of anything being possible. This breathless optimism tells particularly in the afterword to *Before Sunrise*. The narrator describes sitting in a hotel room in Moscow having returned from evacuation and listening to news of advances by Red Army troops on the Dnepr in October 1943.

And so, the dark army, the army of fascism, the army of gloom and reaction wends its retreat.

What happy and joyous words! However, it could not be otherwise. It could not be that people would win who came out against everything that is dear to humanity – against freedom, against reason; for slavery, for the bestial howl in place of humane speech.

Our valiant Red army is chasing off and destroying the enemy, whose dark thoughts have become darker still.¹⁰⁴

Needless to say, that period of optimism was short-lived; it was quickly followed by the re-imposition of traditional Stalinist control and *Before Sunrise* disappeared along with the fleeting period of hope that it was written for.

Before Sunrise clearly represents something new in the Zoshchenko oeuvre: it has a breadth of philosophical ambition that few, if any, of his previous works can match. However, it also marks a new achievement in writing melancholia into the public realm: *Before Sunrise* manages to bind the melancholic self into the national

¹⁰⁴ «Итак, черная армия, армия фашизма, армия мрака и реакции, пятится назад. / Какие счастливые и радостные слова! Впрочем, иначе и не могло быть. Не могло быть, чтоб победили люди, выступившие против всего, что дорого народам,— против свободы, против разума — за рабство, за звериный вой вместо человеческой речи. / Наша доблестная Красная Армия гонит и уничтожает противника, черные мысли которого стали еще черней.» 3:692.

story in a way that is without precedent in his previous works. It bravely projects a melancholic truth into the public realm, and in the process diagnoses socio-political pathologies through the lens of the narrator's private ones. This is already aeons away from the reticent, voiceless, textual trauancies of Zoshchenko's melancholic aesthetic of the twenties. However, the comparison with the work from the twenties begs one final (and impossibly melancholic) question: if, as this study argues, those melancholic silences in the twenties spoke to and of the writer's own suffering beyond words, then where precisely in *Before Sunrise* does Zoshchenko the writer's melancholia reside. This is not quite the same as that of Zoshchenko the narrator, for, as was suggested earlier, while the narrator is a biographical composite of Zoshchenko, in his *depiction* as a "naïve philosopher of life" he is not perfectly synonymous with the figure of the writer. Moreover, it should be noted in this regard that Zoshchenko always emphasized the literary above all else in *Before Sunrise*: in the prologue he insisted to Speranskii that "this will be a literary work";¹⁰⁵ in a private letter to his wife and son, he also de-emphasized the autobiographical aspects of the book, insisting that, "this is not an authentic biography, this is literature."¹⁰⁶

This is not, of course, to say that the biographical details contradict in any way: there is every indication that they do not. It is rather to question the extent to which the melancholic truth of the narrator of *Before Sunrise* reflects that of the writer, and, by extension, to question the extent to which *Before Sunrise* overcomes that fundamental unwritability of melancholic selfhood which has been encountered

¹⁰⁵ «Это будет литературное произведение.» 3:451.

¹⁰⁶ «[Э]то не есть подлинная биография. Это литература.» Letter to V V Zoshchenko of 17.11.43 collected for publication by V V Buznik, 'Iz pisem M. M. Zoshchenko k V. V. Zoshchenko (1941-1954)' in N A Groznova et al (eds), *Mikhail Zoshchenko: materialy k tvorcheskoi biografii*, 3 vols. (St Petersburg: Nauka, 1997-2002), Vol. 1, p.94. The assertion was in response to his wife's quite understandable ire at the portrayal of their marriage in *Before Sunrise* as, for his part, an emotionally detached acquisition of a mother substitute. The offending incident is the episode entitled 'A New Path' ('Novyi put'): see 3:501.

again and again in this study. In this regard, it is important to remember that *Before Sunrise* only purports to be an account of an autotherapy and not that therapy itself. In looking for the real melancholic self of the writer one is thus definitively directed elsewhere; but where to exactly? A clue perhaps comes at the moment of cure, when the narrator, collapsing exhausted from his intra-psychic duel, notes that: "My weapons – paper and pencil – lay by my side."¹⁰⁷ As much as anything else, the cure is written: in unknowing accordance with Klein's notion of creative reparation and in a foreshadowing of Kristeva's idea of melancholic art, the deliverance from melancholic inwardness apparently comes through writing. But, if *Before Sunrise* is not this written cure, then, one might ask, where is it and why was it not possible to offer this to the reader instead?

At this point it is worth remembering the fact that the anamnestic end-point of *Before Sunrise* is the breakdown of 1926 and 1927, after which the narrator claimed to be an entirely new man. As argued earlier in this study, this same period marked the onset of all those experiments in authorship and situated reading that came to characterize so much of Zoshchenko's fiction of the thirties. It is surely not too great a jump to conclude that the original, actual, written cure is contained precisely in these post-1927 works that had already been offered to the reader and that have been discussed in the last few chapters of this study. Support for this conclusion is perhaps to be found in the following passage where the narrator of *Before Sunrise* denies the anticipated accusation that his cure has taken away his literary gift along with his melancholia, rather, he insists that:

¹⁰⁷ «Мое оружие – бумага и карандаш – лежали рядом со мной.» 3:626.

My hand has become firmer, my voice clearer, and my songs more joyful. I have not lost my art. And the sureties of this are my books of the last twelve years. The surety is this book of mine.¹⁰⁸

It will be recalled that in those books of the previous twelve years, a melancholia, based in the writer's own history of mental ill-health, could be found in the textual disjuncture created by the interpolation of the author-figure. If the melancholic truth of the writer in these works resided in this textual disjuncture, then it seems natural to turn to comparable gaps in *Before Sunrise* in pursuit of the writer's melancholy in this book as well.

Surely the most intriguing such gap in *Before Sunrise* is that yawning three year hiatus in the anamnesis between 1909 and 1912 that was suggested earlier in this chapter. Moreover, it is interesting to note that it was in 1911, pretty much in the exact arithmetic centre of this anamnestic blank space, that Zoshchenko the writer met Nadezhda Rusanova-Zamyslovskaja, that *femme fatale* who stalks so much of Zoshchenko's fiction and who recurs throughout *Before Sunrise* under the name of Nadia V.¹⁰⁹ All this raises the tantalising possibility that Nadia V may lie near the heart of the writer's own particular melancholic truth in *Before Sunrise*. There is certainly something archetypal about Nadia V as she appears in the book: despite her relatively late chronological position in the period of the anamnesis, she is actually introduced surprisingly early in *Before Sunrise*, in the second vignette at the start of the anamnestic section in fact; moreover, as the narrator's (and the writer's) first love, she seems to prefigure all the other doomed romantic liaisons and troubled relations with women in the recollections that follow. This makes for something of a suggestive structural prominence which is only compounded by the narrator's curious reluctance to allow the image of Nadia V to be conflated with, and thus reduced to, a totalizing

¹⁰⁸ «Моя рука стала тверже. И голос звонче. И песни веселей. Я не потерял мое искусство. И тому порукой мои книги за последние двенадцать лет. Тому порукой эта моя книга.» 3:689.

¹⁰⁹ See 3:464, 486-487, 481-482, 491-492, 516-517 and 618-619.

Freudian schema; at one point, confronting the fears that coalesce around the image of Nadia V the narrator fiercely rejects the notion that these are sublimated fears of his own mother:

But she was not like my mother at all. In her appearance there was absolutely no resemblance. That's as may be. I also was not terrified by the image of my mother. I was terrified only of that which was connected with the hand and thunder.¹¹⁰

There is a curious sense here of the narrator's intuitive need to keep Nadia V apart, in a separate psychological category; a sense that is only overcome by appeal to his own all-embracing mythology of "painful objects". However, having been party to all the artful evasion, empirical instability and circular reasoning behind the genesis of the "painful objects", neither the reader nor the writer can accept as definitive this appeal to the narrator's own totalizing mythology. This then leaves an oblique and ill-defined intimation of Nadia V's separateness, at least in the narrator's psychological self-perception.

Yet, all this only ever remains at the level of suggestion; Nadia V ultimately remains a bafflingly-silent, looming presence in *Before Sunrise*. In the final count the problematic image of Nadia V, who haunts so much of the book, remains unresolved as a kind of melancholic lacuna at the heart of the work that ultimately resists reduction to the terms of the narrator's own curative mythology of painful objects, or indeed to any other curative mythology for that matter. Thus, for all the book's innovation, experimentation, ambition and complexity, and without detracting from the genuine development that *Before Sunrise* represents in Zoshchenko's long textual engagement with melancholia, there nonetheless remains a sense in which the

¹¹⁰ «Но ведь она вовсе не была похожа на мою мать. В ее облике не было никакого сходства. Ну что ж. Я и не страшился образа моей матери. Я страшился лишь того, что было связано с рукой и громом.» 3:619.

ultimate unwritability of melancholia persists in it: in some ways we have not really come so very far from that early melancholy aesthetic of textual truancy after all.

Conclusion

This study has argued throughout that melancholia, whether named or unnamed, latent or manifest, inflects Zoshchenko's work to a significant degree. Whether functioning silently within larger aesthetic structures or being addressed discursively, melancholia and melancholic traces inhere across a wide variety of works: early or late, comic or serious, short or extensive. While the obliquity of it clearly varies across different works and particular periods in Zoshchenko's artistic career, melancholia nonetheless remains an abiding feature of the writer's artistic imagination. For this reason alone Zoshchenko's textual melancholia is a worthwhile object of study in its own right. However, as a unifying strand extending across the oeuvre, it is also of particular relevance to the ongoing critical project of uniting the comic and serious halves of the Zoshchenko canon. Reading the melancholia across Zoshchenko's oeuvre makes obvious the limited nature of the insight into Zoshchenko's writing that results from regarding separate parts of his creative output in isolation; it thus provides a further demonstration of the enormous importance of considering the canon holistically and of properly situating individual works within that canon.

Exploring the nature and development Zoshchenko's textual melancholia across his artistic career reveals the existence of a consistent melancholic vision rooted in the writer's own sufferings that underlies all of Zoshchenko's melancholic writings; yet, at the same time it provides evidence of the significant textual developments which transform that vision from the unvoiced absence at the heart of a comic aesthetic into a more generalized, discursive and philosophical engagement with melancholia. The case of Zoshchenko's textual melancholia thus strongly points

to a complex inner unity of the Zoshchenko oeuvre through all its gradual evolution in form, style and technique.

This notion of pronounced textual evolution within the context of a consistent authorial vision is particularly important for a proper understanding of Zoshchenko's literary engagement with melancholia. As the foregoing analysis has suggested, the melancholic truanies which voicelessly structure the comic aesthetic that Zoshchenko honed throughout the twenties are gradually brought into greater discursive relief through the introduction of a more or less parodically inflected authorial voice from the late twenties onward. As this study has tried to emphasize throughout, the emergence of this voice does not supplant the underlying melancholy: rather its optimistic inflection brings that melancholy into starker relief as the wordless textual or intertextual supplement to the joyful optimism of the discursive surface: in a sense, the authorial voice provides the light against which the dark can assume a meaningful shape. Both the optimism of the authorial voice and the supplemental pessimism of the unvoiced melancholia thus remain locked in mutual dependence on each other for their very definition: being two parts of the same dialectic, they become inseparable aspects, both of the literary effect achieved in these works, and of the authorial persona at their centre. It is crucial to note that this effect is contingent upon the authorial voice never managing to solidify into self-sufficient, monologic discourse. Indeed, this is precisely the case in all of Zoshchenko's later works: although it grows increasingly direct and is brought closer and closer to pure authorial speech, in none of Zoshchenko's mature literary works does the authorial voice ever completely attain the appearance of self-sufficiency. To be sure, the parody shrinks, losing all of the comedy and much of the pejorative inflection: however, it pointedly fails ever to attain the appearance of perfect synchronisation with the

putative voice of the writer: while the mask is stretched progressively tighter across the writer's face than is the case in the earlier work, the narrative voice in the mature work remains no less of a mask.

This insight, while crucial to a proper appreciation of Zoshchenko's textual melancholia, is also important for a broader interpretation of the later works. By emphasizing the complexity, polyphony and enduring metaphysical reticence of these later works, it ameliorates a contemporary critical tendency to view these mature works, particularly *Before Sunrise*, as straightforward, monologic and even piously homiletic. This latter tendency perhaps owes something to Kornei Chukovskii's important memoir of his long friendship with Zoshchenko. Chukovskii ruefully noted Zoshchenko's conscious abandonment of comic irony in the early thirties and described the writer's subsequent development as a thirst "to teach and preach" ("*pouchat' i propovedovat'*").¹ Chukovskii even set this development in the context of a supposed tendency on the part of certain Russian writers (he presumably had Gogol and Tolstoy in mind) to turn their back on art in favour of proselytization and pedagogy.² The problem with this view is that, while it offers important insights into Zoshchenko's personality, motivations and attitudes as a writer, being a memoir, Chukovskii's opinion is neither primarily based on, nor entirely coincides with, the texts themselves. Whatever his personal motivations might have been, Zoshchenko's works, even the late ones, simply do not preach. The conscious avoidance of any form of ultimate narrative closure in any of the works would undermine any overt attempt at homily. Moreover, the intricate structure of an optimistic narrative palimpsest overlaying unregenerate melancholic pessimism makes for a poor propagandistic vehicle. To be sure, the author's enjoining of the reader to embrace future-oriented

¹ K Chukovskii, *Sovremenniki*, p. 544. The account of the disavowal of irony is at pp. 538-539.

² Ibid, p. 545.

optimism, social adaptation and immersion in the collective is heartfelt and sincerely articulated. However, this is only one aspect of the authorial voice in the later works; the melancholic pessimism that the overt discussion evokes introduces a note of ambiguity that checks the propagandistic excesses to which the 'author' is occasionally vulnerable.

Thus Chukovskii's view of the simple-hearted didacticism of the later works is open to challenge. When Zoshchenko's mature works are read in the context of his career-long textual engagement with melancholia they acquire a new narrative subtlety, discursive sophistication and pedagogical reticence. The authorial voice in these works is tempered by the melancholic undertow which it itself evokes, and the apparent didacticism of the authorial voice is interrupted; its polemical thrust is split, being directed as much toward itself as to others. This instance of self-interrogation softens the pedagogical edge of the authorial voice and makes the didacticism immediately harder to discern. To this must be added the fact that the tendency in all the longer, mature works to emphasize the subjective particularity of knowledge and experience weakens any putative moralization, as do the works' origins in careful acts of reading, both of self and other. Moreover, the sustained concern, especially evident in *Youth Restored*, *The Sky-Blue Book* and *Before Sunrise*, with exposing the limited reach of abstract ideas is hardly consonant with 'teaching and preaching'. To be sure, the later works are not without their agendas: while evoking and acknowledging the wordless truth of the melancholic self, they consistently urge adaptation to the demands of social Being and external reality. However, in this they do not display significantly more didacticism than could be found in much of the satirical work of the twenties. That the mature works offer a different reading experience to that of the earlier comic stories hardly needs saying: they are of course longer; they are much

less funny, often deliberately unfunny and what humour remains is frequently much more acerbic; they make fewer allowances for the superficial reader and also demand more in terms of attention, memory and mental dexterity from the diligent one. However, they are not markedly more didactic than their predecessors: if their points are frequently made more trenchantly than might have been expected in the work of the twenties, then this reflects a more pronounced philosophical ambition in the mature works and not a regrettable lapse into cant and homily.

The greater philosophical ambition that characterises these later works is also intimately connected to Zoshchenko's textual struggle with melancholia. In fact, the single most important critical benefit to accrue from the study of Zoshchenko's textual engagement with melancholia is the insight this affords into the ideational content of Zoshchenko's art. Zoshchenko has, of course, long been acknowledged as a comic writer of rare genius; he is also widely valued as an innovative prose stylist; however, he remains generally underappreciated as a thinker. This is unfortunate, for the existential outlook that motivates Zoshchenko's attempts to give textual shape to his melancholia has a philosophical profundity which speaks far beyond the limits of either his own time or those of his particular psychopathology.

Zoshchenko's textual engagement with melancholia grapples with a dilemma: the yearning to voice the subject-centred truth of melancholia while eschewing pathological self-obsession. The horns of this dilemma are surely most pronounced in Zoshchenko's melancholic aesthetic of the twenties. That early authorial model, typical of the comic fiction of the twenties, whereby an intricately, but privately, written self was repeatedly committed to textual anonymity, would seem to be prone to private 'melancholizing'. Yet, alongside this, those frequently melancholic textual truanies, while in all likelihood speaking to and of the author's own melancholy,

nonetheless attain a more objective, aesthetic function by becoming an indispensable aspect of the existential satire that these pieces enact. It is this satirical function of melancholia that is strengthened and developed in the mature fiction, where its philosophical ambition is greatly enhanced.

Thus Zoshchenko fashions his melancholia into the kernel of a generalized philosophical outlook. In this regard, it should be noted that Zoshchenko's later melancholic writing, while ostensibly more confessional, remains remarkably restrained in its discussion of the *particularities* of the writer's own melancholia: there is no extended agonizing over symptoms; there is no attempt to heroize his sufferings (quite the opposite in fact); there is also no direct reflection on the *particular* (rather than the generic) causes of his pathological grief. These particulars are not necessarily hidden (one thinks here of the significant frequency of allusion to the Rusanova-Zamyslovskaja affair for instance), but they are referenced obliquely, seldom discussed in their own right and are never allowed to predominate. Zoshchenko's philosophical melancholia does not lead to a reading of melancholy in the world in the mode of, say, Robert Burton; rather, in Freudian fashion, it locates the source of melancholia in the disjuncture between self and world, and, going beyond Freud himself, locating it in the more particular disjuncture between self and word.

In this way Zoshchenko's melancholia comes to assume a particular philosophical and existential importance: its wordless, causeless grieving comes to stand for the surplus of subjectively experienced, embodied existence over that which is reducible to Being in language; it becomes the result of that residual aspect of subjective existence which refuses to yield to collective ontology. That is why it is a suffering beyond words, and why it colours language with a morbid pallor. This

notion of melancholia lying in a psychological realm beyond the bounds of language has obvious similarities with Kristeva's understanding of the condition as the impossible mourning for a primal immanence lost with the subject's birth in speech. Indeed, this similarity tells in the fact that both Kristeva and Zoshchenko seem to suggest amelioration of the condition by re-inscribing the melancholic subject, as far as possible, into discursive reality, particularly through writing. However, here is perhaps also where they differ. Kristeva seems to see this re-inscription in overwhelmingly poetic terms, as (following Mallarmé) a search for a "total word, new, foreign to the language", one which is capable of "capturing the unnameable."³ She thus tends to look to those poetic moments of lyrical immanence with the word as key to bridging the symbolic gulf separating the melancholic subject from the realm of language.⁴ Zoshchenko, by contrast, always makes the gulf explicit, perhaps even unbridgeably so. He rigidly maintains those melancholic spaces intact, leaving them as unvoiced interruptions disturbing the discursive surface of the text. Standing as testimony to the limits of language, his melancholic silences constitute a linguistic pragmatism and philosophical reticence worthy of the Wittgenstein who insisted that "what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence".⁵

Indeed, melancholia in Zoshchenko always remains resolutely wordless. This is perhaps more obviously the case with the early comic fiction: however, even when it is addressed more directly in the later works, melancholia still never acquires the capacity to speak for itself. Even in the explicitly therapeutic *Before Sunrise*, melancholia remains a wordless absence only given shape by the self-consciously rational and optimistic voice of the authorial narrator: when called on to speak for

³ *Black Sun*, p.42.

⁴ See especially her discussion of Gérard de Nerval (whose metaphoric "soleil noir de la mélancolie" provides the title for Kristeva's book). Ibid, pp. 139-172.

⁵ L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D F Pears and B F McGuinness (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961[1921]), p. 151.

itself, it can only do so mediated through the intertextually appropriated words and images of others. Yet this voiceless presence contains all of the existential insight of Zoshchenko's important melancholic truth: the subject will always fail to perfectly lose (or perfectly find) himself in the collective embrace of language; he will always fail to attain a complete purity of Being in language.

This melancholic insight, its origins in psychopathology notwithstanding, elucidates an important aspect of the general human condition: language will always be more or less unequal to the total experience of subjective Being. Just as it is in the nature of embodied humanity to aspire to a purity of linguistic and social Being, so it is also in their nature to fail in this aspiration to a greater or lesser degree. That this is a human or linguistic failure, and not just a melancholic one, is perhaps confirmed by those legions of hapless *skaz* narrators and bemused Zoshchenko heroes who comically skirt around the melancholic void at the edge of language and social Being. Moreover, in their profusion of naïve misunderstandings and baffling eccentricities, all these heroes unknowingly demonstrate the inescapable fact that, for all its inadequacy, there is no meaningful alternative to Being in language. A common thread that runs through all of Zoshchenko's work is the implicit assumption that language, for all its inadequacy, is all that stands between the subject and himself. And as the bewitching beauty, but ultimate meaninglessness of the infinite symbolic regresses making up the first half of *Before Sunrise* make clear, Zoshchenko, like Dostoevsky and Tolstoy before him, had absolutely no faith in the stability of a psyche turned in on itself. Not presented with any alternative to language and social reality, the challenge of Zoshchenko's melancholia for the individual thus becomes learning to live amongst the silences and blanks of a socio-linguistic reality that can only ever imperfectly absorb the full experience of embodied selfhood. The reader is

shown the necessity of finding a meaningful subjectivity in the discursive realm, but also of accepting the ultimate distance of this discursive subjectivity from the actual experience of selfhood: in a sense, he is urged to learn how to live parodically, at a certain remove from his own sense of self. This is a theme that in essence does not change from the earliest work to the latest; readers are always urged to establish themselves properly in the external world, to fashion a meaningful, personal, socio-linguistic existence, but also of not losing sight of the fact that that existence will never wholly coincide with their sense of themselves. The cost of not adequately accepting this need to live both within and without language is the endless cycle of melancholic torment that prompted Zoshchenko's textual engagement with melancholia in the first place.

This sense of fashioning one's own place in a discursive realm fundamentally insufficient to the ineffable fullness of selfhood has a special resonance in the Soviet setting because of the extremity, inflexibility and radical collectivity of Soviet discursive reality. As several commentators have noted, the Word assumed a special importance in Soviet culture, particularly in its Stalinist variant. Both Keith Livers and Evgenii Dobrenko have stressed the centrality of the Word in the cultural mythology of Stalinism, a mythology and civilisation founded and justified primarily in the discursive realm.⁶ Indeed, Boris Groys has depicted the whole Soviet experiment, and indeed the very idea of communism itself, as an attempt to effect the "linguistification" ("*Versprachlichung*") of socio-economic reality.⁷ This centrality of the Stalinist Word surely goes some way to explain the uncommon tenacity of the regime's efforts to dominate, mould and micromanage Soviet discursivity. In a culture

⁶ K Livers, *Constructing the Stalinist Body*, pp. 124-125. E Dobrenko, 'Iskusstvo sotsial'noi navigatsii: ocherki kul'turnoi topografii stalinskoi epokhi', *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach*, bd. 45 (2000), p. 128 [pp. 93-134].

⁷ B Groys, *The Communist Postscript*, trans. T H Ford (London and New York: Verso, 2009 [2006]), p. xv, pp. 1-31 and pp. 55-74.

so completely founded on a pervasive and inflexible discursive reality, the need for the individual subject to find a meaningful home in that social and linguistic reality acquires a more than usually pronounced existential urgency. Thus, Zoshchenko's textual melancholia, by staging the aporetic clash between an intrusive, inflexible and demanding social and linguistic reality and an effusive, unstable and dependent subjectivity, really cuts to the heart of the Soviet totalitarian experience of the 1930s. By posing an existential choice between personal adaptation to the rigorous demands of Stalinist discursive reality and the chaos and pain of alienated selfhood, Zoshchenko's textual melancholia invites reflection on accommodation with the regime through existential necessity rather than ideological zeal. It thus complicates the simplistic dichotomy of opposition and support that continues to dominate understandings of the era, particularly in the West: in hindsight, it perhaps also invites reflection on the almost superhuman qualities required to offer genuine opposition within Stalinist culture.

This same reflection on the existential demand for accommodation with the regime can perhaps also be extended to the writer himself. Reading Zoshchenko's urge for adaptation in the context of his textual melancholia reveals that his acceptance of the regime is primarily existential, and not based on any principle of moral or political metaphysics; if Stalinist reality is the only external reality, then the subject has no choice but to ground himself in that reality, to some degree at least. Zoshchenko's loaded silences and poignant trauancies represent the scars of a necessary existential immersion in a restrictive discursive reality that exists beyond the reach of subjective choice. In this context, the oblique note of protest at the impossible restrictiveness and irrationality of this reality in *Before Sunrise* becomes both braver and more poignant than might otherwise appear. For all this, however, the

relevance of Zoshchenko's existential vision, while very much a product of its time. is not anchored in the particularities of the Stalinist context. It is in the nature of human Being to confront the melancholic necessity of subordinating a plenteous selfhood to a conversely pallid discursive existence. Twenty-first century humanity, while usually spared the excesses of Stalinist discursivity, nonetheless has not escaped the basic melancholic dilemma Zoshchenko describes; in an intensely mediated world in which humankind is relentlessly urged to find self-realisation in commodities both textual and physical, alienated moderns in the twenty-first century are perhaps almost as much in need of Zoshchenko's melancholic counsel as were his Soviet contemporaries.

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